

Rising Ambitions

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... Had she just landed on the Child of God?... Oh, she was so screwed.
YukimuraOC. Some mild language. Rewritten.

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Rising Ambitions

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the second story window

A/N: (08.17.14) This first chapter has been rewritten. Again. I'm sorry. I just- I don't know what's wrong with me.

A VERY IMPORTANT NOTE TO MY READERS

(Tumblr announcement.) I got this idea from fyerigurl. I get a lot of 'when will you update so and so' and 'what do you think about this and that' and 'how do you do this' or 'where did you come up with this' sorts of questions in my inbox and my reviews. I've never really gotten the chance to reply to these things even when I always think of the answer to myself, so I wanted to give you guys this tumblr for any questions, comments or concerns you may have. If you click on my profile, the link to the tumblr will be at the top of my bio. (In case ffn updates are lagging again, the name of my tumblr is 'xcoffeelatte' - so just do xcoffeelatte dot tumblr dot c-o-m hahaha.)

(A small introduction.) Hello, readers - whether you've been a long-time reader of this fic or just arriving, please take a moment to read over this little introduction! I started this story back in 2008 - I think I was in middle school, then, hardly a writer, a fangirl at best; I didn't have a developed voice or a distinctive writing style to call my own, with a pathetic diction to my name.

I'm not much better now, but I feel as though I've come a long way from my roots. And this story has a very dear place in my heart as one of the first stories I've started, and I *will* finish this, in time. As my writing continues to evolve, I may come back and rewrite a few chapters, and this first chapter alone has seen many revisions.

The entire story itself took a completely different route than when I'd started in 2008, but I feel as though it's better as it is now.

I know I've already rewritten this story completely once, but I will be revising it once more - part of the reason I hadn't updated in so long. I look back on the earlier chapters and I just see so many ways I can improve this story, improve the characterizations and delve into certain parts I'd neglected that would be so great.

But, for those who followed me on my MKYK journey, do not fear - this rewriting is nothing like that one.

I make a pledge. I will upload *at least* one chapter a day.

Futhermore, this rewriting is nothing like my first one, either. This is not a completely plot change and rehaul - this is so I can accurately reflect my current writing style, and insert a little things here and there, and just overall improve the story as a whole.

Please, take a read, tell me what you think, and hopefully, you enjoy it!

Disclaimer: I do not own PoT.

The classroom is in a state of clear disarray. The last class of the day has just ended and the teacher has left not moments before, and a noise slowly filters into the room until it heightens to a raucous fray - gossip here and laughter there, plans being made for the afternoon stretch ahead. Somewhere from all the din, a girl's distinctly excited tone joins in:

"Nori-chan, Nori-chan - guess what?"

A girl raises her head from where it'd lain atop her arms, sleepiness scrawled across her features. A lazy yawn escapes her lips, eyes drowsy and lidded and hazy; the words haven't quiet registered in her mind, yet, and she's trying to rub away the sleep from her vision. "Hm-" another yawn. "What?"

" *Well*," the girl begins, an over dramatic tone to her voice, and Noriko highly doubts that what she's about to say is worthy of such anticipation. Ai got herself so worked up over the smallest of things, really, like when she saw one of the famous tennis regulars outside of school the other day - said it was like seeing a celebrity out and about doing " *normal people things* ."

But then again, they *do* attend Rikkai Dai - the academy prized for its excellence in the sports, consistently swarmed by scouts and sports reporters and even fellow athletes for their golden array of star athletes and teams. It's a point of pride and prestige, here, to wear a regulars' jersey, to be a part of such a fanfare and Rikkai Dai had always been an institution that emphasized-

Rikkai Dai, always win.

She supposed that here, in such an environment, athletes really *were* celebrities.

Ai plants her hands on Noriko's desk, leaned in, whispers a conspiratory "Well, I heard that *Yukimura Seiichi* is coming back! He's been discharged!"

Noriko blinks languidly, slowly, eyes glazed with a blank sort of curiosity. Certainly not the reaction Ai had been hoping for, if the exasperation in her expression is anything to go by. But Noriko is drawing a blank, feels as though that name is achingly familiar and its an irritating tug in the back of her mind, because-

Yukimura.

The- the sick one, yes?

Well, that's what Noriko had him labeled as in her head, anyway, not that she'd tell anyone. She'd transferred in her third year, quite *after* the initial fuss had begun about the so-called 'Child of God' - that was his nickname, right? And before she had a chance to really

understand and get into the whole craze about Yukimura, he'd been promptly carted off to the hospital and on leave from school.

She can't quite remember what it was for - she'd like to say cancer, but it might be something else. Cancer, she decides, firmly. Right?

The entity of 'Yukimura Seiichi' was primarily unknown and unimportant to Shiori Noriko's life thus far, but sometimes, though, Noriko wonders at what kind of a guy could have earned himself the nickname as a *Child of God* ?

Must be some *monster* of an athlete.

Befitting of his nickname, the entire school seemed to be on some 'Yukimura' rave; girls, boys, *teachers*, even, were constantly mentioning his name in passing comments as though it were a natural part of their daily lives. It kind of unnerved Noriko, to be honest, but- if the guy was brilliant enough to be called divine, well, who was she to judge?

In fact, he was such an impressive person that even *Kirihara Akaya*, that horrendous second year, respected him. Noriko had bumped into that kid, once, to be rewarded with a sight of *blood red eyes* ; to this day she dearly hoped that those were some colored contacts, instead of his actual eyes.

"Really?" Noriko hums under her breath, a small spark of interest flickering in her eyes. Perhaps, she thinks, she was finally to lay her eyes on this urban legend. Her excitement was still severely lacking, however, (but how was she supposed to be excited at the return of someone she'd never even met?) and Ai visibly shows her disapproval in a frown.

"Oh, whatever," Ai mutters irritably. "You're such a bore sometimes, you know that?" Ai pauses then, a pensive look dawning on her face. "Oh, hey - didn't you say that today was the regular selection matches?"

Noriko pauses, before horror begins to seep into her eyes.

"Oh my *god*," she breathes, eyes widening and hand flying up to her mouth. The color's drained from her cheeks, then, and there's an unhealthy sort of pallor to the fear glimmering from her expression. "Ai, why didn't you tell me sooner? I'm *late*," she moans.

Ai huffs, plants her hands on her slender hips. "What do you mean, '*why didn't I tell you sooner*'? You're the regular here, not me - honestly, Noriko, you're so addle-brained all the time, it's a miracle you even remember to *breathe* -"

But Noriko was already off, duffle bag slung across her shoulder and loose tie swinging behind her as she ran. She paused in the doorway, though, to give Ai a sheepish wave and a cheeky smile, before running down the hallway. She didn't have much time, considering-

Shiori Noriko: starting striker for the Rikkai Dai girls' soccer team - the reigning champion in the middle school circuits at the national level. Everyone's familiar with Rikkai Dai's do-or-die motto of *whatever it takes*, and for this particular team, it meant staying on top of one's game at all times. It meant that being a regular was a *privilege*, and rotational regular selection matches took place at least once a month.

At least.

Since her transfer to the school, she'd been the team's striker without fail; most of the regulars tended to keep their spots with consistency, but there were always one or two who slipped halfway through. And *rules were rules*, their ever-strict Captain would harrumph, whistle in between her lips. At the thought of the captain, Noriko grimaces and runs a little faster.

Halfway down the hallway Noriko skids to a halt and decides that no, going down to the staircase, running through another hallway and finally out the main entrance would *not* get her to the matches in

time. A late regular means an angry captain, and an angry captain was *never* good for anyone. Tick tock, tick tock, an almost daring sort of clock made itself present in her mind.

Her eyes flicker to the wide open window.

It *is* only the second floor, she reasons. People don't *die* from this sort of height, right? This was reasonable. This was a good idea.

People jump this sort of thing in the movies all the time!

And if it really came down to it, Noriko thinks, she'd honestly rather have a broken leg than an angry captain (an angry captain was nothing to scoff at).

With one last glance down the hallway, Noriko makes her decision before logic comes back to coax her out of it. She tosses her duffle bag out the window with little finesse, calls out with a careless "Watch out, if anyone's there!" and-

-jumps.

And without further ado, Shiori Noriko, third year, placed in the regular selection matches, nationally-ranked soccer star, has jumped off the second story window of the famous Rikkai Dai Fuzoku B Building.

" Ow! What the *fu* -"

There's a long string of creative curse words and indecipherable squawking, each syllable distinct with a viciously angry note, that falls from the boy's lips afterwards. His hand rubs at the back of his curly-haired head, eyes bright and indignant and bewildered as he continues in his haphazard tirade. From beside him, the rest of the tennis regulars have already begun to tune out their youngest member.

Beside the second-year boy is a yellow-and-black gym bag, lying harmlessly on the grass - it had fallen, quite literally, out of the sky.

'RIKKAI DAI FUZOKU GIRLS' SOCCER TEAM' is written across the bag in a bold, proud white font, with a smaller 'SHIORI NORIKO' printed just below the label. Kirihara swivels his head to scowl and direct a heated glare at Niou and Marui, both of whom are snickering at the poor boy.

Yanagi bends to quietly examine the bag, one brow raised and curiosity on his features. But that's nothing new, considering curiosity is his constant state of being; *curiosity killed the cat*, Yukimura used to tease, with that chilling soft tone to his voice.

But cats have nine lives, Yanagi would reply serenely in return.

Somewhere amidst all of Akaya's huffing and stomping, no one had thought to actually peer upwards to see *where* the bag had come from in the first place. That is, until it's too late, and the distant 'Look out, if anyone's there' registers just a moment after; by then, something is already falling from the sky, down, down, at a breakneck speed-

-right towards their beloved *captain*.

Seven pairs of eyes - some bugging out of their sockets, some horrified, a few delightedly amused - stare in absolute stark silence at the black shadow that fell rapidly towards the blue-haired head of Yukimura. The only person with enough sense of mind to dart into action is Kirihara himself, who attempts to run towards his captain in time to push him out of the way - unfortunately, the boy trips over the duffel bag on the floor.

Sprawled on the ground, he whips his head to bare his teeth at the bag, colorful curses falling from his lips once more.

Sanada, then, vein bulging from his neck, manages to bellow: "Yukimura - *move* !" before lunging towards the boy himself.

But, as stated before: it was far too late for anything to be done by then.

Yukimura Seiichi is nothing if not calm in the face of anything, including unidentified flying objects (a U.F.O.) hurtling towards his body, and he stares at it quietly, tilts his head in mild amusement. He lifts his arms to form a gentle arch, and without batting an eyelid, deftly *catches* the *U.F.O.* as it lands in his arms.

The unidentified flying object is identified in the next moment as:

A human. A human girl, quite clearly bewildered and confused as she stares at Yukimura through wide eyes, limbs askew in awkward angles.

Yukimura tilts his head the other way.

Well then.

As for Noriko, well. She's-

She's not quite sure how to describe her emotional state of being at the moment. When she'd tossed her duffel bag out the window and leaped, she hadn't even thought that there was a possibility someone would be beneath her - quite obviously, because if she had, she wouldn't have jumped. And beyond that, if she *had* thought someone was below her, the *last* thing she'd expect was for said person to *catch her*.

But that's precisely what had happened, and now she's - quite awkwardly, might she add - resting in someone's arms, her own limbs akimbo and her eyes wide with bafflement. For a moment, she's not quite sure *what* to do, simply sits there, flabbergasted, eyes wide and lips opening and closing like a fish impression.

The boy stares back at her with a sense of such calm that it sends Noriko spiraling into *more* panic, if anything.

Finally, she finds some form of words to say: "I- Well- Um- I... I *did* call out for people to move."

It's then that she sees *Kirihara Akaya* glowering at her from the floor, and her expression grows even more confused. "What?" slips past her lips before she can quite stop it, and it's only then that she realizes there's an entire ring of boys around her, each wearing some form of surprise, horror and amusement on their expressions. She pauses.

These faces are oddly familiar.

Her head jerks to gaze at the face of the boy holding her-

And oh, *wow*, he's a *pretty boy*, with pale skin the color of smooth porcelain and wavy, dark hair framing his face like a halo. His smile is beautifully serene even when it's so small, and his features are delicate and intense at the same time; there's a sort of amusement from his blue eyes that makes her heart quicken its pace.

Who is he?

Yukimura isn't *surprised*, per say.

This is Rikkai Dai, after all; no use in being surprised over girls throwing themselves off of second stories. Though he had to admit, this wasn't exactly the welcome he'd expected upon his return. Niou had joked about girls throwing themselves into his arms, but he hadn't really thought there'd be a literal manifestation of said actions.

And somewhere in the background, he's sure he hears Sanada quite possibly *frothing* at the mouth (from half anger and half shock, he was sure), Niou and Marui howling with laughter, and Kirihara, screaming obscenities at the girl and the duffel bag in turn. All this, Yukimura had to admit - was quite a delightfully amusing first day back.

He watched the confusion in her eyes with sharp eyes, deconstructing and breaking down every minuscule little quirk of her lashes with frightening detail - observing her, *analyzing her*, getting inside her head and figuring her out inside out. (It's second nature by now, this natural inclination to take people apart and see how they work and read their eyes and see every little dark crevice of their soul).

He lets the girl down gently, without a word - and if anything, the tension in the air doubles.

Noriko takes a step to regain her balance, feels gravity shifting down and planting her feet firmly on the ground. She looks around, and to be quite honest, she *still* hasn't been able to wrap her head around the events that had just transpired. And Noriko wasn't a very large thinker, tended to act before she thought, tended to be thrown and blurt out inappropriate things at inappropriate times, so the next words out of her mouth are:

"So- what a fall, huh?" Her sheepish laugh dies in her throat when she notices the lack of any humor in the boys' expressions.

And she's still trying to place a name or an identity to these all-too familiar faces, trying to link why on earth *Kirihara Akaya* is here, as well.

In the meantime, she wipes her hand awkwardly on her soccer shorts before extending it to the- *beautiful, frightening beautiful, her mind adds* -blue-haired boy. "So- um- hey. I'm Shiori Noriko." A little smile, tinged with painful awkwardness and an uncomfortable edge.

Yukimura stares at the hand for a moment, a small smile still placed calmly on his lips. Noriko squirms under his gaze - there's just something about his eyes that's too heavy, too intense, for it to be a simple smile. She forces a cough and a smile on her own lips.

The silence lasts for a second more before Yukimura takes her hand. "Yukimura Seiichi. A pleasure," he murmurs, because even if 'pleasure' is a far cry from the situation, he's polite and suave.

Noriko blinks and surprise overtakes her expression. Yukimura catches it and tilts his head.

His voice registers in the back of her mind, and she notes that it's- *silky smooth*, sounds like velvet, and isn't that odd, for a sound to remind her of a fabric? But that's honestly the only way to describe the way it sounds. Beyond that, there's a far more pressing matter, because his name- his name, his name, his name, is so *familiar* and she *knows* she should know who it is, because she's certain she'd heard that name just a few minutes earlier-

It registers in her mind with a small 'click.'

Yukimura Seiichi.

Yukimura Seiichi, the *sick boy*.

Noriko finds herself swallowing. "Ah... you can't mean *Yukimura Seiichi*, as in... the Child of God -"

Yukimura's smile widens.

Noriko feels her heart drop into her gut.

... Had she possibly just fallen on the *Child of God*?

"Oh, shit," passes her lips before she can even fully comprehend the situation.

Oh. *Oh*. She only notices then that all the boys around her are wearing tennis jerseys; of *course*. He was their *bloody captain* - the monster athlete with a crazy moniker and crazier reputation, who she'd almost resigned to thinking of as an 'urban legend.' Oh, oh, oh-

Hysterical laughter threatens to crawl up her throat.

The captain of Rikkai Dai's tennis team - the one with the miracle recovery from his disease.

The Child of God.

The *Child of **God***.

Oh, *god* .

She's just hurtled her body at a child of God.

There was going to be a special, *special* hell for her in the afterlife.

Noriko's eyes go wide, and suddenly, being late for soccer practice doesn't seem all that terrifying - not when compared to the hostile glares of seven pairs of eyes in front of her. Her awful, awful tendency to blurt out highly inappropriate things makes an appearance once again, because she's blurting out "Oh, congratulations on recovering from cancer, man," and there's a nervous laughter to accompany those awful, awful words.

The laughter dies away when the boys' glares turn sharp, and Yukimura's smile widens just a teeny bit.

"I mean... must be hard, huh? Cancer and tennis and all?" Oh my *god*, she wants to moan; *shut up*, stupid mouth. But Noriko's babbling, now, a forced smile stretched so wide her cheeks ache.

Yukimura's smile never once wavers. He takes this, like everything else, in stride. He hadn't quite expected this, but when he thinks about it, he supposes 'sick boy' is how most regard him, now. Since his admittance into the hospital, his reputation as a tennis player had gone down considerably; he'd even heard rumors that he wasn't a good tennis player flying around.

And he'd been too sick to display his real skills, and the rumors had gone on.

That was what happened when an emperor left his throne - his throne vanished, his kingdom fell, ashes, ashes, everywhere.

The girl in front of him - who is she, even - hasn't stopped her silly words, though, and he catches the tail end: "... -that's pretty cool, though." When he glances at her face, he notes with a hint of bemusement that the smile on her lips is real, this time. "I mean- I don't- I don't know that much and I've just heard the rumors, but - I think it's cool. Your recovery. Um. That you're back for your team so soon."

It makes Yukimura pause.

Suddenly, something's beeping from the girl's hand, and she looks down at the cell phone clutched in her grasp.

"Oh, *shit* - I'm *late*," she huffs. Noriko glances nervously at the boys around her, smiles sheepishly. "I uh- I gotta *go*," she mumbles, reaching for the duffel bag on the floor. She snatches it up, tries one last attempt at a smile (that fails miserably), dashes through a quick "I am so, so sorry about this - sorry!" before sprinting off in the direction of... somewhere.

"Who the *fuck* was that?" Kiriwara hisses, nursing his knee and staring at the rapidly disappearing figure of the still-running girl. He narrows his eyes at it, turns to Yanagi for some sort of explanation; there's a lot of things about that girl that irks him now that he's in a state to actually think about it.

Falling on their captain?

Laughing?

Calling him a tennis player with cancer?

Who the hell did she think she was?

Not only that, but she'd dared to hit his, the *great Kiri-hara-sama's*, head, with a damn *duffel bag* ?

Yanagi clears his throat, then, a small pause before: "Well. Shiori Noriko, as she introduced herself as. Soccer player; can be found in tournaments dating back to when she's ten years of age. Starter for the girls' regulars. Third year, birthday is October 15th, fifteen years old, favorite food is sushi, body measurements-"

"That's *enough*, Renji," Sanada coughs, then, and Yanagi shrugs smoothly with a smile.

Sanada fights the overpowering urge to pinch the bridge of his nose.

He'd *known* something would go dreadfully wrong today, when he'd broken his sister's hand mirror that morning; he wasn't normally so paranoid or superstitious, but there had been something unsavory tugging at the bottom of his gut, telling him today would be a bad day.

He should take Yukimura for a check-up later today, just to be sure he was okay.

Yukimura laughs, then, and it dissipates the still-lingering tension in the air. He reassures the boys that he's fine, particularly Sanada, and beckons his team to continue their trek to the tennis courts. He'll write it off as just another day at the strange Rikkai Dai.

Sanada breathes a sigh of exasperation; this particular assembly of regulars never bode well for his peace of mind.

Their captain was too easy-going for his own good.

One was a sugar-high idiot.

One was a fool who found anything unpleasant funny.

One was on the path to becoming a bloodthirsty murderer.

One was a human computer.

One was a 'gentleman' who was secretly a sadist.

Only two were normal on the team, as Sanada saw it: him, and Jackal.

Actually, Sanada pinched the bridge of his nose as he saw Jackal looking at Marui's mini-cake collection with interest, there was only one normal person.

Himself.

And he wasn't very safe, either.

CHAPTER FIN

READ & REVIEW PLEASE!

the court gates

A/N: (08.17.14) Revised.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Read the A/N at the bottom of the page!

Disclaimer: I don't own PoT.

The Rikkai Dai tennis courts were currently *engulfed* in a myriad of screams, all pertaining to some form of " YUKIMURAAAA! " Girls from every grade and every class crowd around one another in an attempt to catch a better glimpse of the tennis players, and their numbers are so large that they had fanned out to almost overrun the walking path that crisscrossed the school grounds.

In fact, as Noriko would later point out, they looked like a swarm of hungry *bees*.

Some of the males took to walking around campus with their hands shoved deep inside their pockets, muttering to themselves in irritation, all the while sending occasional pointed glares towards the courts. The tennis team had always been popular, to be sure, but ever since their captain's return, their popularity had *skyrocketed* to the point where it was becoming ridiculous. And, well, how could they, the *normal* males of the school, compete with those pretty boys that were incredible athletes?

Girls hardly spared them a second glance.

Noriko - long hair held up in a sleek pony-tail and a number of silver studs glinting under the sun - walks towards the area now, another girl beside her. The girl next to her is shorter than Noriko, slim, but with the same toned muscled limbs as Noriko; she has a neat, sharp black bob and sharp eyes, cheekbones prominent and ears unpierced. Kamemiya Saya, captain of the Rikkai Dai girls' soccer

team - Noriko has an unbound love for the sport, but Saya's enthusiasm for soccer borders on the more... *manic* side.

Then again, Noriko supposes that one needs such a level of dedication if one was to be the captain of a national champion team.

Saya isn't the tallest girl, and when she walks next to Noriko (who was 5'6, rather tall for a girl of Japanese descent), she looks very, very small at 5'3.

Both girls glance at the girls clamoring for the tennis team, and Saya pauses to give a contemptuous flick of her short hair, huffing with a tinge of irritation. "Seriously," she murmurs, a hint of condescension lacing her words. "They're just *boys* . These girls need to find something else to scream about."

Noriko laughs beside her, easy-going and laughter light and breezy. Her duffel bag swings alongside her cheerily. "I dunno," she replies, tilting her head at the crowd. "It's- kind of cute." She grins at Saya, who rolls her eyes in turn.

Noriko turns her attention back to the screaming hoard of girls, readjusts her grip on the strap of her bag. There's a mild wonder in her eyes when her gaze drags over the crowd, and she finds herself rather impressed by the sheer number of fans the team has. "I wonder why we don't have as many fans as them." This is rewarded by a sharp glare from Saya, and Noriko immediately closes her mouth shut with an impish grin.

"I don't understand how you think that *mess* is cute at all," she sniffs.

Noriko laughs again, goodnaturedly. "No?" She pauses. "I guess it does make sense for them to have so many fans. I don't really get tennis, but- they're supposed to be really good, right?"

She thinks, then, of how she'd fallen on the *captain of the team* the other day, grimaces at the memory. She hadn't told Saya what happened, not yet, and wonders if she'd be terribly mad with her for

her awful faux paus. Noriko hasn't seen any of the tennis boys since that event, though, at least- not until now. She catches a clear glimpse at the athletes in the courts at the moment, cranes her head to get a better view.

Her arm, which had been swinging her bag in rhythm with her walk, comes to a stop, as do her feet. Her eyes are wide, and her lips are parted in a perfect 'o.'

The players she assumes to be the regulars (given their eerily pretty faces and odd hair colors and all) are playing against one another; their arms move fluidly through the air, rackets connecting effortlessly with the fuzzy green ball. They moved with a sort of practiced ease and a strange grace, because tennis wasn't meant to be a graceful sport, now was it? That, and Noriko doesn't know much about tennis, but she's rather sure that tennis balls usually didn't move quite so fast - nor, she thinks as she watches a particular red-headed boy with bubblegum in his mouth - did the ball roll daintily *across the net*.

And isn't that-

She sees Yukimura Seiichi, playing against *three players*, and he's-
winning.

It makes her stop short, makes her blink once, twice, pausing to wonder if perhaps she was seeing things, if she's not mistaken. But when she opens her eyes again, the vision hasn't changed: Yukimura is still playing (or rather, defeating) three players at once. Her eyes widen just a bit more. She takes an unconscious step forward, drawn to the match, when-

Thwack-

Noriko stumbles, hand flying up to the back of her head, where the flash of pain is still blooming. "Ow," she exclaims, protests, turns around to see Saya holding her own duffel bag, which she'd used to

hit Noriko's head with. Noriko gives her an affronted sort of expression, but Saya only narrows her eyes.

Saya plants her hands on her hips. "Geez, Noriko. Get a grip, will you? You're so out of it as of late."

Noriko ducks her head and smiles apologetically. "We're going to be late to practice," Saya huffs. "We have to go greet the newbies, remember? You're the vice captain - get your *shit* together. Not to mention, you totally *killed* at tryouts yesterday - and *not* in a good way."

Noriko grimaces at the memory.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Rinse, repeat.

Noriko breathes deeply through her mouth - that new breathing exercise Saya had been drilling in her head for the past week. She's bent on one knee to tighten the laces on her cleats, eyes narrowed and already trained on the black and white ball that's laying harmlessly in the center of the grass field. Her eyes trained on the ball, Noriko raises her hands to pull her hair into a firm ponytail; she shakes her head a little to loosen up her neck.

Okay.

She was in the zone - she was ready. She could do this-

"Noriko!" Saya's voice screeches at her from a megaphone crackle. "Get your ass out here! Everyone's waiting on you!"

Noriko's eyes dart to Saya's angry little form, and she gives a sheepish grin, jogging over. "Right, right," she murmurs, smiles

placatingly.

Just then, there's a large wave of screaming that flits through the air and reaches her ears from beside the soccer fields. For a moment, she's distracted, and her eyes fly to the source: the tennis courts, just beside the fields. It's completely surrounded by a milling crowd of girls, and Noriko's eyes bug out of their sockets - they look animalistic and primal, half-trying to climb over the tennis court fences.

What in the world-

She doesn't get to complete that thought, because in the next second, Shiori Noriko is knocked out cold.

From the sidelines, Saya stares, slack-jawed.

Several newcomers, who had been trying out for the team, gape in surprise and worry and disbelief.

One lone tryout stands a few feet from Noriko, hands at her mouth and horror in her eyes. She watches her chances of joining the team disintegrate before her eyes; there was no way they'd let her join, now that she'd kicked the ball into the vice-captain's head-!

Saya turns red. "SHIORI NORIKO! I TOLD YOU TO PAY ATTENTION TODAY!"

Noriko sighs at the memory. She rubs the mild bump that had yet to recede on the back of her head, and laughs. "Saya, loosen up. Everyone already knows who we are, no need to greet them again. Besides- that girl yesterday had one *wicked* kick, right?"

Saya pauses. "Well. I suppose-" But her words die when she sees the mischievous glint overtaking Noriko's features, blooming and spreading across her grin. Noriko was always coming up with these half-baked ideas and plans that always ended up with her in-

"Saya - let's take a five minute break and go watch the boys' team; they looked pretty cool-"

And before Saya could protest (which Noriko knew she would), Noriko's already started jogging towards the courts. Saya bristles, cheeks flushing red; *really*, she huff. Noriko is the vice captain to Japan's number one seeded soccer team - she ought to show some more dignity, some more *honor*, some more-

Oh, no.

Oh, *no*.

Something catches her eye in the distance, and the color drains from her face. " *Shiori Noriko! Get down from there!*"

Well, dear reader.

Shiori Noriko was currently perched atop the twenty-foot tall fence surrounding the tennis courts with a careless and casual smile, as though nothing were out of place at all.

Nothing at all.

When Saya finally arrives, huffing and puffing, to the fence just below where Noriko was seated, she sends the girl a cheeky smile and a wink and a flutter of her fingers.

Noriko hadn't exactly planned this from the beginning.

She'd made her way over to the courts, only to find that the herd of girls weren't exactly going to part for her to walk through with a smile and a wave. Still, she'd persisted, and attempted to weave her way through the crowd-

-and promptly found her face shoved roughly into the fence, for girls had already begun to press forward. What else was she supposed to do, then, but to clamber upwards?

See, here, on her cheek: large, diamond imprints were still there. And despite the throbbing pain in her cheek, she can't help but to be impressed at the sheer amount of fans the team had; Noriko can see the full crowd from her vantage point. She kind of starts to understand their popularity, too, when she peers down at the players: they look more like *models* than athletes, and in the back of her head she wonders if all tennis players are this good looking.

Maybe she should have gotten into tennis, not soccer.

Noriko returns her attention presently to her captain down below, who is turning a lovely, lovely shade of red: "Noriko! Get down from there- as your captain, I *command* you-"

Her voice is boisterously and obnoxiously loud, as always, and Noriko rolls her eyes with a teasing smile pulling at her lips. She didn't know why Saya was all flustered about this - climbing fences was even easier than climbing trees, no need to have an *aneurysm* about it; it wasn't good for her health, didn't she know?

"Stop *exposing* yourself like that, come down already-"

"I'm not exposing myself, stop saying it like that," Noriko heaves a sigh. She was wearing her soccer shorts and spunks underneath; she'd long since changed out of her uniform skirt, though the tailored, white button-up shirt was still on her torso. And besides, even if she *were* wearing a skirt, the only people down there were girls, anyway.

And then, she hears another voice join the fray.

This one's soft, musical and lilting in tone, and the *velvet texture* is awfully familiar-

"Ah, Miss? May I ask why you're disturbing our practice by seating yourself by such... unconventional means?"

Something in her stomach swoops nervously.

She dares a glance.

It's Yukimura Seiichi, peering upwards at her with a mixture of amusement, mild surprise, and quiet, quiet danger.

Shit.

Yukimura Seiichi had been rather pleased that day.

His team had been in top condition the entire week, presumably from his return to the coats - especially Akaya, who had been twisting over backwards to keep up the 'good boy' routine. How *adorable*.

He hadn't said a single bad word to anyone throughout the entire day - which was a record. Though, when a new club member had accidentally hit a ball into his head, he'd almost cracked; Akaya had turned around, hissing and eyes blazing and beginning to turn red, but when he'd caught a glance at Yukimura, he'd immediately silenced himself.

Yukimura smiled serenely. Good boy.

Sanada had done a good job of taking care of them while he was gone - and there he came now, storming over to a group of slacking players, a thousand berating comments on the tip of his tongue.

All was right in the world.

... Until *someone* began shrieking so loud that even he heard it over the continual drone of the fangirls, loitered around the gates.

"Noriko! Get down from there! As your captain, I command you!"

He frowns.

Where was that voice coming from? And- who was Noriko (that name was oddly familiar, though) - and where was 'Noriko' supposed to be getting down from?

He turns around, a mild curiosity lingering in his eyes - and when he does, he starts to wish he hadn't. Yukimura maintains his composure as perfectly always, because one didn't captain a team of demons and tricksters for as long as he did without learning the ability of *flawless calm* . But for all of his experience, he can't help the way his eyes widen ever so slightly, the way his lips part and his brows furrow by a bare millimeter when he sees-

A very familiar Unidentified Flying Object sitting upon his fence.

Seriously, he frowns - what was *with* this girl?

The 'falling from the second story window' was awfully strange enough; she had to go and *climb his fence*, too? This girl was terribly invested in ruining his property, it seemed, as well as his person - not to mention, that precarious position was simply a lawsuit waiting to happen. Yukimura Seiichi was *not* about to go down in history as the captain who got his team shut down because a fangirl happened to climb his fence and fall to her death; this was only his second day back, thank you very much.

He takes a moment to trail his eyes over her comfortable posture. She makes it look as though she has nowhere she'd rather be, unafraid of the fact that she's 20 feet in the air. Even her legs - clad in loose, black soccer shorts and yellow knee high socks (Yukimura realizes now that the Rikkai colors are *really* hideous) - swing back and forth, back and forth, a picture of perfect ease.

What in the world is she *doing* ?

"SHIORI NORIKO! GET DOWN FROM THERE!"

The same voice he'd heard just a moment ago cuts through the air and hits his ears with an unpleasant screech. His smile stiffens.

"... Is that-?" Yukimura hears Sanada's wary voice from beside him, and he turns, wearing a stony smile.

"Yes, I believe so."

"... Really."

"Mm."

"I don't suppose that-?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Ah."

The two lapse into a comfortable silence, then, eyes speculative as they peer at the strange (terribly, *terribly* strange, Yukimura thinks) girl sitting atop their gates.

Then:

"WOAH-IS THAT-?" accompanied by the faint 'POP' of a gum bubble snapping.

Sanada audibly sighs - a heavy, world-weary sort of sound that is far beyond the age of his fifteen years. "Aa."

The three fall into silence once more.

It's soon broken by a : "... Is that a-"

"Yeah. Cool huh?"

"Marui, a stranger sitting on our gates is not to be called 'cool,'" Renji sighs.

Silence sweeps in again.

Then:

"Oh my."

"Shit."

"My dear Yanagi, is that-?"

"Yes it is."

"Oh."

"Shit."

"Niou, language."

Another wave of silence passes, before:

"You guys, I think there's something on top of the gates-"

A round of stares land on Jackal, and then realization hits him hard and fast and all at once.

"... Oh. *Oh.*"

That's all that's said for a while, until:

"Oh my *holy fu* -"

"Akaya!" Sanada coughs.

Eyes bug at the figure. "What the hell is she *doing* up there?"

Yukimura decides that now is the time to regain control of the situation. He's *Yukimura Seiichi*, captain of the Rikkai Dai boys' tennis team, the Child of God, starter since his first year and the leader of the *demon generals* ; he can handle *one girl* sitting on top

of his fence. He smiles serenely, steps forward despite the frantic protests of his team ("She's crazy - she might jump-") and peers upwards at the girl.

Kirihara gulps. That's Buchou's *angry* smile (he has, Yanagi concludes, at least seventeen point five different smiles for any given situation).

"Miss?" Yukimura's smile widens. "May I ask why you're disturbing our practice by seating yourself by such... unconventional means?"

Noriko finds herself staring with a quietly growing horror at the very boy she'd landed on - the boy who was the *child of God* - peering up at her, smiling as beautifully as ever. She realizes, then, what a ruckus she'd caused; admittedly, this isn't one of her best ideas to date, but one couldn't very well blame her for escaping upwards when the fangirls had crushed her to the gate, could they?

Her lips open and close, mind trying to produce words, an excuse, an explanation- nothing.

"I. I, um. I just- well-

"Yes?" Yukimura's tone is perfectly pleasant, but there's a sharp edge to his smile that has Noriko's apprehension growing.

Sanada sighs. He can feel a migraine coming on, ramming into his head with all the fatality of a blazing truck; perhaps he can ask Tezuka where he gets his pills for headaches - they seem to work wonders for him, considering he's been running that team of psychotic maniacs without having an hysterical breakdown thus far.

"I just- wanted to see your practice...?"

Somewhere below, she hears Saya groan.

"... And the ground isn't a suitable place to do it, why?" Yukimura's smile grows a little wider, but all Noriko sees is a feral grin and glinting fangs on his features.

"I uh-"

"Yes?"

"I couldn't- I couldn't see well-?"

Saya groans again, louder this time. Yukimura's ensuing smile is clearly *not amused* .

Noriko takes this as her cue to climb down, and her legs move deftly to carry her down until it's safe enough to jump the rest of the distance. She does so halfway down the fence, lands quietly on the ground and stumbles once to regain her balance; when she looks up, an apologetic, sheepish expression has overtaken her features. "Sorry, sorry-! I just wanted to see what all the fuss was about. I didn't mean to ruin your practice."

Yukimura's right brow lifts upwards. "Mm. I see."

Niou takes this moment to lean in towards his teammates, whispers a "Ten bucks she's not human."

"Ten bucks she's an *alien* !" is Marui's enthusiastic response, his gum-chewing almost furious in its speed, now. Jackal, from beside him, winces at the sugar intake.

" *Twenty* that Buchou's gonna fry her alive," and Kiri-hara's voice has far too much glee in it for the words he's saying. He almost relishes in the anticipation of the fury their captain will unleash on this girl - because she was *seriously* getting on his last nerve (but he couldn't snap, not when he was being on his best behavior for 'Mura-buchou to see).

Jackal sighs. "You guys." His teammates could be so childish sometimes, but he takes solace in the fact that at least his self, Yagyuu and Renji were *mature* -

"Twenty five that Genichiro's about to hit his limit soon," Yagyuu murmurs, holds up a few bills beside his lovely smile. His expression turns a tad sinister to mirror the devious grin Niou is wearing, and Jackal blanches a bit at the twin features, because he still hasn't gotten used to their creepy partnership.

Well, he sighs. At least there's still Renji.

"I'll go with a twenty," Renji slides forward a clean, crisp bill with a flourish and a sharp twist of his wrist. "Ninety-eight percent chance that Seiichi's silence will scare the girl away."

Jackal's lips press into a thin, disapproving line, eyes stern and features grave, but Renji slips an arm around his shoulders with a light smile. "Jackal, dear, lighten up. It's all in good fun."

Jackal parts his lips to protest, when *another girl* bursts through the gates. He's startled by the ensuing metal clang as the door hits the fence. He doesn't even have time to react, not really, because she shrieks a furious "*Shiori Noriko*, " and stalks forward to grab the other girl's arm in the next second. "What is *wrong* with you," she huffs, "I swear, you're always so-"

"Kamemiya," Sanada sighs, and *what*, Sanada *knows* one of these strange girls?

The voice is unmistakable, what with its strangely low timber and too-serious intonation, all severity and harsh lines carried across in monosyllables. Saya stiffens immediately at the voice, curses herself for not realizing what stepping into the *tennis courts* meant (it was her bad, really, she should have remembered).

Of *all the gates* Noriko could have chosen to climb, it just *had* to be Sanada's. Sanada fucking Genichiro, wonderful, law-abiding student, star athlete and *perfect boy all around*. Please, do note the sarcasm dripping from her words. If one were to ask her, she thinks that he must have some ten foot long stick shoved up his-

Cough.

Just last year, Saya had succeeded in pestering the student council president into approving funds to completely renew all the soccer equipment. Yes, their equipment might have been new, hardly a year old, but Saya had wanted a fresh start for when *she* started her captaincy; after all, she and Noriko's reign was supposed to be the coming of a new era. She'd wanted the best, the newest, the latest for her team.

She'd come *this close* to having it, when Sanada, the *prick*, had heard and voiced his disapproval at such 'blatant bending of the rules,' and the president had readily agreed.

Ass.

Saya finds his entire existence wholly irksome - it's fine if he wanted to live his own life as a little goody two shoes, but why, she asks, does he have to go around sticking his nose in matters that aren't his own? Oh, right, because he's a righteous little ass -

"Kamemiya," Sanada repeats, and she turns to him with a loud sigh and exasperation in her eyes.

"Sanada." She's ready to sass him, then, to ask him *why* he feels the need to repeat her name twice in a row, when she realizes- that she's the captain with the vice-captain who's just climbed up his gates, and she inwardly rues the day she appointed Noriko to be her second in command. Noriko could climb a thousand gates a day for all she cared, but she couldn't just go around climbing *Sanada's*, damn it, didn't she see?

"Er. Excuse my player, Sanada. She's not- feeling well. Today."

Sanada crosses his arms, lifts one stern brow. "She managed to climb twenty feet into the air, Kamemiya. I think she's feeling pretty good."

Sanada thinks Kamemiya is a little unhinged (not that he'd ever say it - one simply didn't call crazy people crazy to their face). She's always had some odd *obsession* with him, don't think he hasn't noticed - asking him what test scores he received, asking what his record was for the mile, asking what grade he received on that literature paper last week. She seemed to have a strange fixation on his achievements, gloated on her own when hers surpassed his, muttered irritably when he did better than her.

She rolls her eyes and makes gagging motions behind his back (not very discreetly at all) when he gives presentations in class, purses her lips when he passes her in the hallway.

He doesn't even have an earthly *clue* as to where all this one-sided dislike stems from, but knowing Kamemiya, it could even be that little incident from over a year ago. He highly doubts it, hopes it isn't so, but Kamemiya's always been a bit strange.

"I meant," Saya hisses, drawing herself upwards indignantly. "Not feeling well in the *head*. She's just coming back from the nurse's office, because one of my other players kicked a ball at her head."

Sanada's brows climb higher.

Saya curses silently to herself. She realizes that she's just made her team look clumsy; *damn you*, she thinks - well played, Sanada. *Well played*.

Noriko watches the entire stiff exchange with a half-grimace on her features. She doesn't see why all the fuss has happened over her climbing one *teeny tiny* fence, but she supposes that she ought to at

least stop this whole impending trainwreck before something actually explodes.

"Saya," she interrupts, steps forward to sling an arm around her shorter captain's shoulder. She knows *exactly* how much her best friend despises the tennis team's vice captain (a bit over the top, if you asked her, but to each her own, she supposes), and she'd really like to avoid a fight at the moment. Especially considering the amount of hysteria she's already created among the tennis team boys over the span over the past two days. "I think it's time we get going and stop disturbing their practice; we still have to greet the newbies, remember?"

She turns to Yukimura with another sheepish smile. "Um- sorry again, for everything. I'm really, really sorry. I didn't mean for it to be this whole thing- we'll um- be going now." Sheepish, sheepish, sheepish. Yukimura's answering smile is frigid.

Noriko takes the opportunity to scuttle out, half-dragging Saya along.

Yukimura, with a passing glance at their retreating figures, turns around to smile benevolently upon his own team, who blanch at his expression. "Well?" he murmurs - and that's all it took to send them rushing to resume practice.

My, my, he marveled. School had gotten *quite* boisterous in his absence.

A/N: As some of you may already be aware, there was an incident addressing a plagiarism issue by another author, kamiyama-kun, in his story 'The Contrast Effect.' He was an author I respected for one of his prior stories, 'Onegai, Tutor!', and when several of my readers PMed me of this, I was devastated. The copies were rather word-for-word in most instances, and I was deeply disappointed that such a thing could have happened.

I would like to thank Tsukuda Sumiko for locating all of the plagiarized content and listing them out for me, and it makes me so happy that my readers were so ready to defend my work.

That aside, Kamiyama-kun has told me that he changed his fic so that it is no longer the same as mine in certain areas, and I'm just happy this is over with.

This incident took place a few months ago, and I realize that I should notify my readers of the final outcome, especially when so many of you took the time to take down what was copied, etc. Thank you!

the spectator

A/N: (08.17.14) Revised.

A VERY IMPORTANT NOTE.

PLEASE GO TO CHAPTER ONE AND READ THE AUTHOR'S NOTE AT THE BEGINNING THERE. IT WILL EXPLAIN EVERYTHING.

Disclaimer: I do not own PoT.

Yukimura Seiichi finds this day to be an unamusing sort of day, to say the least.

He'd lost his homework assignment somewhere - or more likely, he'd left it at home. Typically, with Rikkai Dai's stringent attitude about everything from sports to academics and everything in between, he *ought* to have been in some trouble with the teacher. Instead, he'd been let off the hook with a gentle smile and a pat on the shoulder, because, *oh*, the teacher was supposedly a large fan of the tennis team.

In fact, when Yukimura later left the classroom, the teacher was seen smiling and waving a friendly goodbye, wishing him well on the upcoming matches.

There's an unsettled twisting in his stomach.

Other students may find themselves enthralled with this sort of favoritism, might indulge in it and abuse it (how many fourteen year olds *wouldn't* abuse favoritism from the institution itself?).

But Yukimura Seiichi is not 'most teenagers.' He finds it... *irksome*, at best, finds it something distasteful and finds that it *ruins* tennis for him, not the other way around.

He's spent a lifetime being treated differently due to who he was, because of his illness, treated like a fragile piece of glass than an athlete because of his 'condition' - but he'd proven everyone wrong, had gone as far as to steal the senses of all those who dared to look down upon him. He laid waste to those who questioned his athleticism and eligibility to play, defeated them so terribly and completely that in the end, there was not a word left to be said about the matter of his ability.

Because *that* was when people stopped assuming and stopped pitying, and started *fearing* instead. (He preferred fear to assumptions).

This favoritism, then, this manner of *institutionalizing* something that oughtn't be restrained or bogged down with such machinations, can only serve to taint the sport he holds as near-sacred. Pun unintended.

He finds himself sighing at the onslaught of thoughts he'd have preferred not to touch upon. Yukimura pushes them to the back of his mind, purses his lips and continues walking towards the courts. He was running a bit late for practice today, after having been held up by avid teachers who insisted upon welcoming him back to school *personally*, inquiring after his plans for the tennis team. He'd smiled beautifully, of course, responded flawlessly and reassured them of the team's continued excellence, but even he can only take so much fake cordiality.

" *Um- Please don't-* "

The noise jars him out of his thoughts and makes him come to an abrupt stop. He pauses and tilts his head to the side, and there, to the left, he finds the source of the sudden exclamation.

A small boy (a first year, Yukimura suspects) sits huddled on the floor, on all fours, scrambling to pick up a flurry of papers that surround him. A group of larger boys - broader shoulders, second-year badges glinting off their uniforms - surround him, snickering, pointing, jostling each other as though the little boy is some hilarious scene to laugh at.

The upperclassmen at Rikkai Dai seemed to find a strange sort of humor in torturing the freshmen, and it's a trend that Yukimura had never found very tasteful, even if he'd never been teased himself as a first year. (After all, who'd dare to touch the boy who was crowned the child of God just moments upon his entry into junior high?) In fact, several small crowds of students were clustered around, laughing, giggling, at the boy who was struggling to pick up all of his belongings.

At one point, he reached for a red notebook, only to stumble back with a frightened gasp when one of the second-years dart forward to kick it out of his hand.

The laughter doubles in volume and the boy flushes a bright, painful red.

"Oops," the second-year grins, unabashed. "Sorry."

The boy draws his lips into a thin line and bites his lower lip, and he's valiantly holding back tears that are obviously beginning to draw in his eyes. When Yukimura turns his glance to the watching crowd, he thinks he sees a person or two looking as though they want to help. But they don't, is the thing, are held back by preposterous ideas of fitting in and these *sheep* irritate him more than he likes to admit.

Most of all, he's disgusted by the startling indifference that these people wear, the way they can laugh at a bullied boy, the way there's some sick sort of pack-mentality going around.

He's seen enough.

Silently, he sweeps forward to gracefully fall to one knee in front of the boy, and his nimble fingers begin to pick up the papers alongside him. Yukimura pauses only to give a condemning, disapproving stare to the spectators, many of whom instantly recognize him and shuffle away. He fixes a harsher stare still on the group of second-year boys and they, too, scuttle away.

He finishes picking the papers up, gathers them into a neat pile before offering them to the first year.

When he looks at the boy, he finds wide, awed eyes staring at him, the size of saucers. The boy continues to stare for a moment longer, jaw hanging open; it's only when Yukimura offers a small smile that the boy seems to snap into motion, rushing forward to accept the papers with trembling hands. "Oh- I- *thank you*," he mumbles. "I don't- Thank you," he's *gushing*, Yukimura almost wants to laugh.

"Hurry up and get going. You'll be late to club activities," Yukimura suggests, and the boy nods so rapidly he's afraid his thin neck might snap. He sends Yukimura one last *worshipping*, grateful grin, before scampering off.

He sighs quietly. Just as he's about to resume his trek to the courts, he's stopped by a voice somewhere to his right:

"Woahh... so the famous tennis captain is a hero, too."

Yukimura turns, and finds himself facing the U.F.O. (it's hard to break the habit of calling her as such, even when he knows her name now). She's decked in her entire soccer uniform this time, and the jersey looks at home slung on her toned figure. She's leaning comfortably, casually, against a nearby wall, her duffel bag (the infamous bag that Akaya now has a hundred-year vengeance on) slung over one shoulder.

The aching casual nature she projects has a stab of irritation flaring in his chest, but Yukimura manages a pleasant smile nonetheless.

Her words could have easily been mocking had anyone else said it, but this girl seems to have such a *harmless* way to go about everything, has not even the slightest hint of malice in anything she says or does. Instead, it comes out as genuine applaud. She raises a lazy hand to wave a slow 'hello.'

Yukimura inclines his head in return. "Hello," he greets, and pauses. "It was only the right thing to do," he murmurs, tone deceptively light for the implications of his words: why weren't *you* doing the thing you ought to have been, and helping out, too?

Noriko catches the hidden meaning, though, winces just a bit at the *accusation* pinning her from his eyes.

She considers saying something, but instead, she shrugs, half-sheepish smile flitting on her lips (and Yukimura thinks that *sheepish* is such a recurring expression on the girl that it might as well be her perpetual state of being). She's not a stranger to such scenes as a student of Rikkai Dai, and she feels a little sorry for the people who are on the wrong end of the social pyramid, but she-

She's not that kind of girl.

She doesn't get involved, doesn't stick her nose into business that doesn't strictly involve her. She doesn't encourage the bullying by any means, but she can't muster up the effort to care enough to step in and say *hey, stop*, because she's already running late for practice as it was most times, see? Noriko's far too much of a *go with the flow* sort of girl to have enough initiative to start things or to stop them; she's not an inciter, not an ender. She's a part of the continuum, instead.

"I don't suppose you were going to help him?" Yukimura asks, a light tone to his heavy (so heavy Noriko almost stumbles under the weight) words, and Noriko blanches at his ability to say such poignant accusations with such a blithe, beautiful smile. Yukimura, on the other hand, begins to find a wary aversion to the girl's nonchalant attitude to what was, apparently, *everything*.

Noriko shrugs again, a painfully carefree lift of her thin shoulders. "Not really," she admits, and Yukimura appreciates the fact that she's at least, if not anything else, honest. "It's not really any of my business, is it?" Noriko idly wraps a strand of hair around her finger, plays around with it, like she usually does. It's a habit. "And- he wasn't hurt," she offers, but it does little to placate Yukimura's growing irritation.

"I see."

And there's something about the way he says those harmless, apathetic two words that has Noriko hesitating, has her feeling reproached and apologetic and chagrined all at once. She holds out her hands in some sort of a peace offering, shoulders rising. "Okay, okay- I know, it wasn't the nicest thing of me to ignore it, but- it's not like I *know* him or anything. And even if I helped him now, it's not as if he won't be pushed down the next time I'm not around."

Yukimura offers a thin smile. "I didn't say anything."

Noriko has to fight to keep the flinch from entering her expression. He didn't have to say anything, she wants to say, because he has this odd way of expressing magnitudes of emotions and messages with just a single look, a quirk of a brow or a gleam in his eye. It's just barely their third meeting and already, she kind of understands, the overwhelming nature of his persona, starts to think that the grand moniker of 'child of God' is rather fitting of the boy.

She decides to drop the subject, then, because her aversion to conflict is rearing its head once more. "By the way," she murmurs, grin stretching over her lips, lightening the heavy mood surrounding them. "I think you're kind of late, *captain* ." She stretches her arms over her head, ignores the fact that she's late, too - because at this point, that was *normal* and expected of her, and Saya didn't even bother giving her punishment laps anymore.

Yukimura simply smiles, but Noriko suspects that he'd forgotten the time until she mentions it, because right afterwards, he nods a polite

goodbye before walking past her quickly.

Noriko almost laughs.

Why so serious, she wants to ask; Rikkai Dai athletes, she sighs.

Noriko draws a deep breath, holds it for a few seconds and releases it slowly. She doesn't really know if Saya's breathing exercises help any, but she does it anyway, the same way she usually goes along with whatever crazy idea Saya has this week. Her eyes are focused on the grass field spanning in front of her, hands pulling her hair through the elastic tie to form a ponytail, expression focused and razor sharp.

She could do this, she thinks. Just another game.

These practice matches are routine - they're held at least once a week to gauge performance levels, and it's nothing new, nothing out of the ordinary. So she can't figure out why, for the life of her, she was zoning in and out of focus. She wasn't typically like this - she was the kind of player who's mind automatically erased everything else from its presence the moment she steps on the field, the kind who's unfazed by anything and everything in the face of the sport.

Saya lauded her for it.

But something's tugging at the corner of her mind, and Noriko doesn't understand it, can't quite place her finger on it. Is it, she wonders with a tinge of bewilderment- a *guilty conscience* ? It doesn't make sense, but there had just been something awfully unsettling in the way Yukimura had leveled a glance at her, had made her feel as though she'd done something terribly, terribly wrong. (But it's just the opposite, isn't it, that she *hadn't* done anything that was the problem?)

"Hey, Noriko- snap out of it. This is the exhibition match for the newcomers. I need my vice-captain on the ball." Saya's suddenly in

front of her, poking her forehead, a frown marring her features.
"What is *with* you lately?"

Noriko blinks, then nods. "Right. Right- um. Sorry about that."

Noriko brushes off her conscience. She'll return to it another time, when she doesn't have an impending soccer match.

After all, she reminds herself, she doesn't need things like a *conscience* when she plays; if Saya knew the things she were thinking, she'd roll her eyes and tell her she was getting soft. Things like guilt and 'right and wrong' had no place on the playing field, not when the only thing that mattered was getting the ball past multiple opponents and into the goal.

Noriko steps forward, jumps a little to work out the kinks in her muscles, cracks her neck once, twice.

"Kay. I'm ready."

Blue eyes glance past the fence, towards the perfectly green soccer fields beyond the courts. His jacket rests upon his shoulders, billows lightly in the breeze and he can hear the faint rustling in his ear. He stands with his arms crossed comfortably, eyes flickering with a haze of faint intrigue, zeroed in on a particular player on the field.

He sees the girl, and she's in the center of the field and in control of the ball. She moves it with a fluid sort of grace, with much more power and agility and skill to her movements than he'd have suspected of her (but then, he doesn't know why he even *had* suspicions for her playing ability, when he knows nothing about her at all aside from her unsavory nonchalance). She pauses for half a heartbeat, maneuvers the ball out of the reach of her opponents, and, without stopping, slams her foot into the ball.

It sails past the goalie's hands, swings cleanly against the net of the goal.

Not bad.

Sanada walks up behind him at that precise moment to put a firm hand on his shoulder. "Yukimura."

Yukimura's eyes return to settle on his friend, away from the fields, and they blink into focus once more. "Hmm?"

Sanada's expression is slightly troubled. "Are you alright? You seem a little... distracted."

"Of course," Yukimura replies smoothly, with a gentle smile. "It's just been a while since I've had an actual school schedule."

Sanada stares at him for a moment longer, clearly doesn't really believe his answer, but he accepts it with a nod nonetheless. He turns away to resume supervising practice, leaving Yukimura back to his own devices. Yukimura follows soon after.

He casts one last glance at the figure of Shiori Noriko, though, hands resting on her waist and cheeks flushed with exertion.

She just- puzzles him a little, was all.

Yukimura had always been exceptionally quick to figure people out, understand them for their wretched insides and notice what makes them tick and laugh and frown; he's good at that: dismantling people. What he'd initially brushed off as a one-dimensional, faceless athlete in Shiori Noriko takes a pause when he realizes that she's not the straightforwardly hotheaded, impulsive girl he'd thought she was, not when she doesn't dive in to heroically and dramatically save the bullied boy.

He thinks of the apathy shimmering in her eyes as she'd watched him without neither a twitch nor a flicker of interest, thinks of how easily she brushed the scene aside.

Yukimura can understand people ignoring a bullied boy.

He'd just thought she'd been one of those meddlesome girls who'd have stepped in.

Perhaps he was wrong.

(Perhaps).

Noriko usually spends her lunchtimes in her own classroom, because she finds it a bit of an effort to walk down the hall to Saya's class. But she'd hardly sat down for lunch the following day when she receives a text message from the girl in question-

New message from: *Kamemiya Saya* at: 12:10 PM

- Come see me. Two minutes.

With a sigh, Noriko excuses herself from her friends and sweeps lazily out the door. She arrives at Saya's classroom in three minutes, not two, and when she appears in the doorway, Saya's tapping her pen against the surface of her desk with an impatient *clack clack clack*. Noriko laughs, though, drops herself unceremoniously into an empty chair across from Saya and waves a joking hello.

Saya rolls her eyes. She's about to say something when Noriko sits a little straighter because something's caught her eye. "Oh- I forgot you're in the same class as that Sanada that you obsess over."

Saya coughs, her cheeks glowing a brilliant shade of red. "I'm not *obsessed* with him," she bristles. "It's just called a little light competition."

Noriko stares at Saya with a brows-raised, incredulous sort of expression, and Saya blushes a deeper red. Noriko thinks that when Saya had once dragged herself to school despite a severe cold and ensuing headache and harsh coughing because she claimed she 'couldn't afford to let that ass beat her on another test,' it's a little

more than 'light competition.' Noriko remembers staring at Saya at that time, bewildered, because what kind of crazy-

Saya coughs again, and Noriko laughs as her friend takes a vicious bite of her lunch. Her laughter dies when she catches another figure in the room. "Oh. That Yukimura is in your class, too?"

He's sitting with Sanada, and the two boys are engaged in a lighthearted conversation; they seem to be pretty good friends, Noriko thinks, watching the way they interact with familiarity and comfort.

"Anyways," Saya says with another bite, "I think we should change up the lineup a bit for the next match-"

But Saya's words trail off when she realizes that Noriko isn't paying attention at all. Instead, Noriko is staring at Sanada and Yukimura, a friendly smile plastered on her lips, and when Yukimura notices her and glances over, her arm shoots up to wave enthusiastically.

Saya rolls her eyes and sighs.

Yukimura, on the other hand, is torn between slight confusion and amusement when he sees Shiori Noriko waving at him as though they were great friends. Nonetheless, he gives a serene smile and a half-wave of his own, and she seems happy enough with his reply, because her attention is pulled back to Kamemiya in the next moment.

Saya jabs her fork towards Noriko's face. "Noriko. *Focus*, c'mon."

Noriko leans back in her seat, limbs dangling carelessly, a picture of complete ease. "I know, I know," she murmurs, voice breathy with a sigh. "Quarterfinals are coming up, and stuff."

Saya frowns. " *Stuff*? It's not just *stuff*, Noriko, it's our club's *entire future* -"

Noriko laughs.

"Noriko-senpai, could you come over here and help me with this?"

Noriko stifles a yawn and stretches, an expansive arms-over-head movement that reveals her slim stomach as her shirt rides up along her skin. Her arms come swinging down and she turns around, then, a questioning smile on her face. She finds the girl who'd addressed her just moments before, standing next to one of the new machines Saya had acquired this year after wheedling with the headmaster.

It was amazing, really, what Saya could convince the administration to buy for the team.

It's a machine that launches balls towards the player so they could practice their kicks, developed in Germany and mass-produced in America. Saya had managed to wheedle not one, but *twenty* of these state-of-the-art mechanisms from the principal, but nobody besides her seems to have quite learned how to use them, then.

Noriko wasn't even really sure how to turn the thing on.

Still, she walks over anyway, and she supposes that trying never hurt anyone. "I'm sure we can figure this out," she says brightly. Her hands come to rest lightly on top of the object, tapping idly at the surface as she cans the row of buttons. *Well*, she thinks. *That's a lot of buttons.*

"What was it you wanted to do with this, again?" Noriko asks, biting pensively on her lower lip. She continues to stare at the machine, as though she can somehow figure out how to use it if she looked at it long enough.

"Kamemiya-buchou told us to turn these off and put them back in the storage room."

Noriko nods, even if she has no idea how to turn it off. Well, then. They had to do *something*, didn't they? Saya was currently drilling some first years and making them run laps, and Noriko really didn't want to get in the middle of that mess. They'd have to figure this thing out on their own.

"Well- let's try this one," she smiles, and the girl beside her is about to protest because that *really* doesn't sound like a good idea, but it's too late.

Noriko's already pressed her finger over one of the buttons.

A second of silence, and she thinks that maybe it'd done the trick after all.

But in the next second, the machine *roars* to life, and Noriko's startled enough to give a little yelp. And before either girls could react, a soccer ball suddenly shoots out of the device at an unbelievable speed (who had even set it that high to begin with?), and hurtles straight towards the-

Oh no.

"... *Noriko* -!"

Saya, it seems, is done with the first years, and had come over to see what the fuss was about - just in time to see Noriko launch a soccer ball towards the tennis courts. She grips Noriko's shoulder with a cold hand, brows furrowing and eyes pooling with disbelief when she sees the display on the machine over Noriko's shoulder. "Are you *insane* ? The launch power is set to 200 mph - that could *kill* someone."

Noriko gives her a bemused, placating sort of lazy smile. "Saya, I don't think it's going to *kill* anyone, that's a little dramatic-"

The second-year timidly raises her hand. "Ac-Actually, it went towards the tennis courts... and I think I saw it hit someone in the

head when it came down."

Saya begins to tremble, then, and Noriko stares at her with a mixture of apprehension and fascination as her cheeks go from white, to red, to *purple* . " *Noriko, you idiot !*"

Noriko bites her lip. "... Oops?"

Saya jabs a finger towards the courts. "Go take care of this."

Noriko splutters. "What do you mean, *take care* of it?"

Saya narrows her eyes in that way of hers that makes Noriko shudder a little, and practically *growls* at her. "Make sure that whatever kid got hurt doesn't go to a teacher about this - or at least, don't let the blame get traced back to the soccer team."

Noriko swallows. "But-"

But Saya's expression is all fury and venom and Noriko really can't even hope to hold up to Saya's fury when she's *this* angry. " *Go,*" she hisses, and Noriko groans.

What *is* it, she wants to know, with this weird way she keeps getting into trouble with the tennis team as of late?

Just as Noriko arrives at the courts (after walking as slowly as possible to delay the inevitable), the metal fence clangs as the door is slammed open. She stands, confused, and watches as a flustered Kiri-hara rushes through, growling and hissing at the surrounding fangirls to "*Fucking move, you harpies, are you fucking deaf? I told you to move, goddamn-*"

Sanada appears shortly after, looking as though he's desperately trying to stay calm, but there's a clear note of panic in his eyes.

Noriko's a bit bewildered.

It's then that she notices that Sanada is holding something in his arms: an unconscious figure.

And then, she notices the telltale pale skin and blue hair and tennis jersey, and something drops into the pits of her guts as a horrible, horrible recognition dawns in her gaze.

Oh, *shit*.

She'd just knocked the *Child of God* unconscious.

"... Shit."

READ. REVIEW. LOVE?

the dramatic murder

A/N: (08.18.14) Revised.

IMPORTANT NOTE . this chapter is going to be one of the bigger changes in the fic since the rehaul - a little more intense characterization of Yukimura, a little more focus on character-study. Let me know what you think in a review!

(**TUMBLR**) I have a tumblr now, where I will answer you, the readers,' questions, as well as post little snippets and sneak peeks of upcoming chapters (like I did for this chapter). My tumblr name is xcoffeelatte and you can find the actual link on my bio page! The tumblr's probably going to start having some little extra scenes, maybe, that don't get added to the actual fic, so it can be something cool to read in the time between my updates. c: b

(**TCAFS**) If you read TCAFS, you'll notice that I have little cameos hidden in here of Fyeri's lovely, fierce Rikkai Dai girls' team characters. Keke.

(**REVIEWS**) A particular reader private messaged me because she'd already reviewed once for the chapter before the re-write, and couldn't review again - if you also have such an issue, you can simply log out and leave a review as an anonymous person, or like she did, PM me as well. I really appreciate the effort and the time you guys take when you review, so much, much love.

And I'd love to hear what you guys think of the new tone of the story, and the little changes that I hope make this a better fic.

Disclaimer: I do not own PoT.

Yukimura Seiichi is a god.

His moniker may be the 'child of God,' but for all intents and purposes, he's a deity himself - well above the the limitations that being a mortal may impose, capable of far more than the term 'human' may imply. He takes what he wants (even a person's *senses*, haven't you heard?), leaves behind the empty carcasses of his opponents and continues on to conquer whatever kingdom strikes his fancy next. When he's on the courts, he's both the judge and the jury, and facing him in a match is the same as a condemnation, because you won't even get a trial before you're sentenced to the electrocution.

Someone's once said that the idea of playing Yukimura was *electrifying*, after all.

He extends a pale, cordial hand, shakes yours and smiles so beautifully you mistake him for an angel.

If Yukimura is any sort of angel at all, he'd be Abaddon, the avenging angel of death, of the abyss, and his wings are tattered but sharp and coated in the blood of his past opponents. You find that out quickly enough - typically fifteen minutes into a match, twenty if you're lucky (or if you don't present enough of a challenge for him to use the *yips* sooner).

Not everyone is aware of just how frighteningly accurate his nickname may be, but there's an undeniable distance between him and most of the people he encounters, if only by sheer aesthetics alone. He's the sort of boy whom one meets, blinks at because a face so delicate, so lovely that it's hard to believe it's real, makes anyone take a pause.

And he smiles, is achingly courteous and polite to anyone and everyone he meets, but there's something very *special* about him that even an idiot will take notice. This uniqueness of his, this- *something, something, that nobody can quite put it into words - aura*

of his wraps around him like an armor, creates a silent chasm between him and the rest of the world.

He's not one of them, despite the identical uniform hanging from his shoulders.

He's untouchable.

So when a stray soccer ball hurls out of thin air and knocks Yukimura unconscious, even Sanada is feeling horrified at what had just occurred. There's a collective gasping sort of sound from the crowd around them, and this scene-

Yukimura, splayed on the floor at a strange angle, eyes closed and lashes casting a shadow over his cheeks, a wide berth of empty space by the crowd-

-it looks almost like a *sacrilege*.

Sanada rushes forward, scoops up his friend, and the rest is a blur.

Noriko doesn't know everything about Yukimura. In fact, she knows next to nothing at all, besides the fact that he was supposedly so talented at tennis that they likened him to a deity, and that he'd made a miracle recovery from sort of disease (she thinks it's cancer, is 86% sure that it is).

But those two facts are enough to horrify her when she sees an unconscious Yukimura being carried out of the courts, and she's rather sure that this means that she's going to someplace pretty hot after she dies. She stares, a half-grimace, half-terrified expression on her lips and eyes. She tries to reason that it's just a soccer ball, that she's taken plenty to the head and had been fine and ready to go within seconds.

... But-

"200 mph, Noriko? You know that can kill someone, right?"

Oh, god.

So when she rushes back to the clubhouse to find Saya, she blurts a frantic, hurried " *Saya!* " as she reaches the door, cheeks flushed from the run (and the nervousness). There's an uncharacteristically panicked edge to her voice and her gaze, one that causes Saya to turn around immediately at the tone.

Saya quirks a brow.

"I think-" Noriko heaves a breath. "-I think I might have killed a god?"

It ends as a question.

Saya's brows furrow. A bewildered sort of frown burgeons across her face, and Noriko rushes to say: "I mean, I don't know if I *killed* him, but I *definitely* knocked him out, big time. I mean- I hope I didn't, but I just might have, and I'm probably going to hell, and, oh god, *oh god*, that's going to be *after* those demon regulars flay me alive-"

Saya stares at her with growing incredulity, because she doesn't understand a single word that Noriko's babbling; it's strange enough that the normally relaxed Noriko is rambling, is even *nervous*, but the content of her words don't make any sense at all. Saya thinks she catches snippets of 'hell' and 'demon regulars,' but that doesn't make very much sense at all.

"-I guess I could transfer, I mean, I heard Hyotei's pretty good at soccer too and I think-"

That's where Saya hits her limit with the nonsense.

" *Noriko*," Saya sighs, heavy with exasperation. "What are you talking about?"

Noriko looks up at her with this sheepish expression, and that's when Saya begins to get the feeling that she really doesn't want to

know.

"Well," she begins, and Saya's blood runs a little cold.

"I may have-

Please, Saya begs silently, please, please, just anything but the-

"-knocked Yukimura Seiichi unconscious with one of our machines-?"

Fuck.

"Buchouuuu," Kiriwara's long-suffering and tearful wail rings throughout the entire hallway, full of anguish and worry and overdramatic angst. It causes another sharp flare of pain to flicker in Sanada's head, and he rubs his temples with a sigh; at this point, the skin on his forehead might rub right off, with the pressure he's been pressing against it.

"Akaya, *shut up*," Marui snaps, and it's accompanied by the little 'pop!' of his gum.

Sanada feels an inordinate, almost pathetic amount of relief, when the wailing stops (Akaya may be a hellion, but he's always been an obedient little child to his senpai on the tennis team). But then, Kiriwara turns to pout deeply at Marui, who sticks his tongue out at him in return, and Sanada feels his migraine returning, threefold.

There really isn't enough room in here for this.

The small nurse's room is currently packed with the shuffling bodies of the tennis regulars, all huddled around a singular bed in particular. Yukimura Seiichi lies in the middle, unconscious and looking paler than usual, which worries Sanada to the point where he contemplates calling Yukimura's usual doctor. His dark hair frames

his face *like a halo*, Sanada can't help but to think and there's a thin, barely-perceptible sheen of sweat upon his brow.

Kirihara fidgets at the bedside, clearly nervous even if he pretends not to be, and he chews on his thumb with a furious glint in his eyes. "Is he- I mean- buchou's gonna be fine, right?" Sanada's reminded that for all of Akaya's demonic plays and reputation, he's still the team's baby junior.

Jackal seems to be thinking the same thing, for he drapes a comforting arm on Kirihara's shoulder, squeezes it once in reassurance. Kirihara isn't placated by this, though, only turns his worried eyes back to Yukimura's still-sleeping figure.

Sanada can't spend much time comforting Kirihara, though, because despite his calm appearance, he's worried, too. It's been hardly a week since Yukimura's return to campus, and it'd been a string of highly, highly unfortunate events. It culminated to this, apparently, with his captain and close friend laid unconscious in the nurse's office due to a wayward ball that had hit with entirely too much force for it to have just been a stray.

Were they *cursed*, or something?

Niou looks irritable and on edge from his corner towards the back of the room, arms crossed and for once, without a teasing smirk on his lips. "Who's responsible for this, anyway?" he hisses, and he swears, the lack of space in this tiny room isn't helping his temper.

Yanagi looks up. He holds out the shiny, plastic soccer ball he has in his hand, offers it with a solemn shrug. "Evidence implies that it's most likely from the soccer team."

Sanada's brow twitches.

The *soccer club*. Again. What was *it* with that-

"Oh my god, Saya- Saya, he's *dead*," a female voice whispers from the doorway. It has everyone's heads turning towards the source, and there, they find two (unfortunately) familiar figures standing beside one another: the captain of the girls' soccer team Kamemiya Saya, and her vice-Captain Shiori Noriko, cowering just a bit behind her.

Noriko's attempts to conceal herself behind Saya's shorter figure didn't work out too well.

"I've murdered the child of *God*," Sanada thinks he hears Noriko say, and a frown stretches across his stiff features. "Do you think this means I'm disqualified from tournaments now?"

Saya nudges Noriko sharply in the ribs and she promptly shuts up. For a moment, Sanada simply stares with a deep, deep frown (that's beginning to ache, to be honest) at the two, trying to grasp *why* these two have shown up out of the blue. He's not even going to try to decipher the weird girl's muttering about killing gods-

He sees the way her eyes flicker to the ball in Yanagi's hands, then, sees the flicker of recognition in her gaze.

And that's the damning sign.

Sanada freezes.

This, the girl, who had nearly injured Yukimura by hurtling herself at him from two stories up, the one who had climbed their fences, the one who-

He *knew* .

And then he snapped.

"*Kamemiya!*" he roars.

Noriko fidgets on her seat on one of the plastic chairs in the hallway. She squirms a little to the left, a little to the right, trying to find a comfortable position - but it's been almost an hour of sitting there, and her butt is starting to ache as it presses against the chair. Noriko shuffles a bit, almost attempts to get up, when she finds Saya's eyes whipping a vicious glare in her direction and a hissed, "*Sit back down* ."

She promptly sits down once more.

"Kamemiya," Sanada continues, "This is your fault, too. How could you be so irresponsible as to allow someone like her to handle such a dangerous machine?"

Saya stops pacing to sneer at Sanada. "*Someone like her* ? I'd watch your words, Sanada - that's my player you're talking about."

Sanada's returning glare is positively frigid. "Yes, *someone like her* . You do realize, that she's a *total nutcase* ?" He gestures towards Noriko, who manages a small wince. "Did you know that she *jumped on Yukimura* from two stories up just last week? Does she have some sort of murderous intention towards our captain-"

Noriko knows she probably ought to stay silent, but really, calling her *murderous* was a bit of an over-kill. "Well, um, I didn't really *jump* on him, I didn't mean to-"

Twin livid glares shut her right up.

"Your player is positively insane, Kamemiya," and Sanada's working himself into a full fervor, now, the faint outlines of a vein visible on his neck. "What kind of an *abomination* have you- who- who fires a soccer ball at someone *recovering from surgery*?"

Saya simply draws herself up to her full height, crosses her arms and sniffs. "Well," she huffs, "maybe your captain is just too weak."

Sanada, Noriko notices, is beginning to *tremble*, and she *really* doesn't want to stick around for this. (It's like watching a volcano build up with pressure, being frozen in place and being unable to run despite the very clear fact that an there's an impending, disastrous eruption).

"You have *no idea*," Sanada grounds out.

"Well you were out of line-"

" I was out of line? Your player is the one who's been trying to *kill our captain* -"

"Would you stop with the dramatics? It's called a stray ball, Sanada, *shit happens* -"

"No, shit does *not* just *happen*, it's *incited* by that nutjob of yours-"

"Incite? Stop making it sound like she's some kind of crazy kid rioting in the street-"

Noriko seizes this chance to slink away, carefully, quietly, and ducks into the first open door she finds.

She turns around to lean her weight against the closed door, lets out a deep and heavy breath that fans against stray strands of her hair that had escaped her ponytail. Noriko finally raises her eyes to scan the room, and promptly stiffens when she realizes exactly what room it was that she'd managed to enter; somewhere in the back of her mind, she can't help the incredulous *you've got to be kidding me*, because there's only so many coincidences one can have with the exact same person before the term 'coincidence' stops being applicable.

Yukimura Seiichi is lying in the bed in front of her, looking like a gently slumbering *angel*, bathed in white with a dark halo fanning

around his head. She blinks, and realizes the white is just the hospital linens, that the halo isn't a halo at all, but simply his hair.

It's easy to mistake him for something celestial.

The next moment brings her a stab of guilt, because even when she played soccer - all fearless charging and sharp kicks and brutal attitude - she'd never put someone in a *hospital wing*, even when she's *trying* to take the other player out. She didn't even know the guy's last name (alright, she did, but so did everyone) and she'd landed him in the nurse's office.

She doesn't think about the fact that he's recovering from an illness, too, because then she really starts having visions of-

"I'm going to a special, special hell after this," she half-groans, half-sighs.

(Somewhere on the girls' tennis courts, the news of Yukimura's accident has reached the ears of the regulars - and in particular, one Hayashi Yuzuru, who practically *relishes* the idea and is *positively delighted* . "Oh, no," she manages to feign an outraged gasp.

"Yuzuru," a flat voice intones. "If you're going to pretend to be worried, then do take care to stop wearing that feral grin. It's starting to scare the first years."

Yuzuru sends an unamused glance towards her captain.)

"You know, for a child of God, you're terribly fragile," Noriko mutters, more to herself than anyone else, and her hands come to rest on her slender hips as she scrutinizes the figure on the bed.

"Or maybe you're just strong enough to hurt gods," is the amused answer that Noriko certainly *hadn't* been expecting.

She takes a surprised step back and narrowly avoids stumbling, and a pair of sharp blue eyes open to peer back at her astounded hazel

ones.

The only thing that Noriko can think of in the wake of Yukimura's sudden revival is-

"Oh thank *god*," she breathes, hand flying up to her heart. "You're *alive* ."

She really ought to work on that blurting habit, she thinks, but nothing can take her down from her rapidly growing euphoria at the revelation that no, she wasn't going to hell, because the child of God was very much still alive.

What wakes him up is a vaguely familiar voice, muttering something about fragile gods. The words take hold in his mind in the next moment, and he realizes who the owner of the voice is, registers what she's just said. It's utter and complete amusement that makes him part his lips and speak.

She's the last person he expects to see when he wakes up - in fact, she's not even on the *list* . He momentarily holds off on his confusion to reply, a lighthearted response to her previous statement, but he blinks, then starts to recollect just what had rendered him unconscious in the first place. Yukimura remembers seeing a black-and-white unidentified flying object spinning towards his head for a split second before it slammed into his forehead.

Lots of U.F.O.'s these days.

He tilts his head quietly to the side, observes her with curious eyes.

The smile on his lips turns a tinge feral when his mind fully catches up with the situation. "... So it seems that you've finally succeeded in hospitalizing me," he murmurs mildly, skips a greeting altogether because really, his politeness has a limit, too.

Noriko grimaces. "Um."

Yukimura is patient. He has nowhere else to be, after all (literally, seeing as how he ought to speak to the doctor before he leaves). He can wait until this strange, strange girl musters up some semblance of an explanation that he most certainly deserves.

"I mean- technically, the *ball* hospitalized you, and you weren't really the specific target - it could have been anyone, and you were just really, really unlucky-"

Yukimura raises a disbelieving brow, smile still smoothly in place. Noriko hurries to explain.

"Wait, no, I wasn't *targeting* anyone, it's just that Saya's so stubborn and insisted on getting these machines that nobody really knows how to operate, and we were just trying to turn it off but I ended up starting it instead and it ended up launching a ball... at... you." Her voice trails off into an awkward silence at the end. Noriko tries for an apologetic smile, but it ends up as a too-large grin on her face instead.

The smile slips from her lips completely when a short *laugh* bubbles from Yukimura's lips.

For one horrible, horrible moment, she wonders if he's suffering from a concussion.

"Are you- should I get the nurse? Does your... does your head hurt?" Noriko asks, hesitant and careful, and Yukimura laughs a little more, a little louder.

Her face is petrified.

He catches the expression on his face, can't help the way his shoulders tremble with his laughter that's increasing with her frown. "I'm fine," he murmurs, then pauses. "Well. I'm not concussing, at least," he amends.

"Listen," Noriko says. She rubs her arm slowly, peers at him through a half-wince. "I'm really, really sorry."

Yukimura doesn't say *it's fine*. It's a little too far down the line for that. Instead, he smiles a small, thin smile.

"I didn't mean to-" she stops herself before she says the same words she'd been repeating for days, now. It's almost hysterical, the kind of awful, awful coincidence that's occurred over the past week - each incident alone is strange and highly unlikely on its own. The chances of them all happening, and *to the same person*-

"I want to say that I promise it'll never happen again, but..."

Even Yukimura manages to chuckle at that one.

"I certainly hope so," he replies.

"I mean, I can't keep hospitalizing you when you have tennis tournaments to get back to, right?" she tries her luck with a joke, realizes a heartbeat too late that it's *highly inappropriate* when the boy is literally lying in a hospital bed because of her at the moment. She cringes a little at her own bad taste, and the expression has Yukimura chuckling a little again.

"That's the only reason you can't keep hospitalizing me - because I have to play tennis?" His voice is bemused, teasing almost, but she has this weird way of making him want to twist her words into things she didn't mean.

Noriko's nothing if not good-natured, though, so she laughs. And her laugh is bright, lighthearted and breezy and laid-back; it makes him tilt his head a little more. "Well, no. But. It's a big one."

Yukimura's smile thins a little, widens a little more. Hm.

"That's why you came back, right?"

His eyes lift to meet hers, and there's no trace of a laugh in her eyes this time - it's all earnest and straightforward and she means it, is serious when she assumes that the reason he returned so soon after his recovery is because of tennis.

(She's right, but just where on earth did she get that odd idea?) The faint pause must convey his momentary confusion to Noriko, because she shrugs, a smooth, comfortable sweep of her shoulders.

Her lips quirk into a small, crooked smile. "I dunno. I just. I figured that's why you'd come back so soon."

"'Soon'?" leaves his lips before he can hold it back.

"Oh. I mean- Rikkai Dai- well, you know how it is, here. People talk a lot." *About certain people* is a detail left unsaid between the two of them, but it's clearly implied in the way she stops her sentence abruptly. She smiles coolly, shrugs again. "I heard about your surgery a few weeks ago. Everyone was-" *Cheering, whispering, celebrating, but some were also wondering if you were still up to play tennis* - "-talking about it," she finishes.

"Ah."

"It's a little soon to be back." It's a statement, not a question, and she peers at him with a half-smile, but it's not a suggestive sort of comment at all. She's not implying anything, not the way a lot of Rikkai Dai students would have. It's just- a statement. Just that. Yukimura kind of likes that, if not anything else.

"I just supposed it was for tennis. Nationals start next week for you guys, right?" Not the big matches, but she wouldn't want to sit out from even the small ones, if it were her.

Yukimura's brow quirks. "You keep track of the tennis season schedule?"

Noriko huffs a small laugh. "It's pretty close in line with the soccer season **(1)** ." She pauses, smiles a little. "And you can tell when tennis tournaments are starting the same way you can tell when soccer's about to start. Hayashi and Saya both get a little-" she mulls over the proper word. "- *intense*. "

Yukimura thinks of Hayashi Suzuru, short build deceptive for her explosive personality, and almost laughs when she realizes how similar she and Kamemiya Saya are. "Ah," he murmurs, a little sound of agreement and understanding. "You think it's for tennis?" he inquires, and the curiosity in his voice is genuine, this time.

She's not wrong, but he finds it strange that she'd arrived to that conclusion, anyway.

"I saw you playing, the other day."

His confusion only increases at her words though his serene expression doesn't betray a thing. He doesn't have to say anything, because she clarifies it in the next moment: "It's easy to tell when someone watches you play. The whole- tennis thing, I mean."

Noriko pauses, has to think carefully for her next words, because even though she's more the type to blurt whatever words she can grasp at in her mind, she's never been the most eloquent person. And she wants to get this particular one right, so she puts a little more effort into it. "It's- you look like you're having a lot of fun. So I just figured. Tennis."

She's missing a lot of words in her sentences, but Yukimura comprehends the overall idea.

"Yukimura-san, we advise you to stay for a little more observation for at least a few more weeks-"

"No thank you."

"Yukimura-san, I really do suggest-"

"I'm fine. Thank you."

"Just for a few weeks-"

"I don't have a few weeks." The frigid, almost hollow note of his voice is unmistakable, and even the doctor cannot muster any words to present to the pair of cold, cold eyes (who knew an angel so lovely could have eyes so harshly empty?). And that had been that.

He doesn't confirm or deny her assumptions. Instead, he settles back against the headboard, drums his pale, long fingers atop his stomach and peers at her through quiet, calculating eyes. He rolls his neck just to test the muscles and is pleased to note that there's no sharp discomfort when he does so. He'd venture to guess that he's completely fine, but he'll stay to speak to the nurse, just to be certain.

(And he's sure that Genichiro is somewhere still in the building. He'd have an aneurysm if he returned to find him gone, and though that thought is rather amusing, he can't exactly take the team to nationals without Genichiro.)

"Well, Shiori-san," he murmurs (fights down the urge to call her a U.F.O.), smiles beatifically in a way that's intimidating. "I'm sure you have places to be. Your apology is accepted." He's feeling generous.

The dismissive tone in his voice is clear, however, and Noriko takes note of it with a wry curve of her lips. "Right. Um- sorry, again. I'll get going, now. I think Sanada is somewhere in the hallway with Saya," she says, gives him one last, lingering glance, before leaving the room.

Yukimura tilts his head back with a quiet sigh of relief.

two hours later.

"I demand retribution," Sanada all but thunders, worked into a sort of fervor he hasn't had since when Akaya had accidentally missed an important exhibition match by taking the wrong bus to the wrong school.

Saya gives him an incredulous expression, flourished with a little splutter. Who even *said* words like 'retribution'? "Retribution?" her voice reflects her bewilderment. "What do you mean, retribution- it's not Noriko's fault at all-"

"Not her fault? *Not her fault* ? Are you insane-"

"I resent that, coming from someone like *you* -"

"Someone like me? Coming from a *completely crazed* -"

"Crazed? *You're* the one with some perfection fetish-"

Sanada chokes. " *Perfection fetish* -"

(1) I'm sorry if I get it wrong in this chapter - I do know that the tennis nationals tournament starts sometime around August 17, but I'm unsure as to the exact soccer season for high schools in Japan. Soccer itself doesn't seem to have a very particular season, so I'm going to say, for the sake of the series, that it's just roughly the same timeline as tennis. (If anyone knows anything about this, though, please do message me and let me know!)

the rooftop garden

A/N: IMPORTANT NOTE. I've included a picture of the present Noriko got for Yukimura on my tumblr, so be sure to go check that out to get a good idea of what it is! (Actually more than one picture of more than one scene, so read the endnotes!)

A little shout out thank you to unknown player, who took the time to log out and leave a guest review to tell me what she thinks of the new revised version - that really, really helps me out a lot and makes me happy!

Disclaimer: I do not own PoT.

The next time he sees her, it's in his own classroom.

Break time has just started and Sanada has left the room to retrieve something from his locker, leaving Yukimura to his quiet solitude (if only for a few minutes until, surely, the other regulars will trickle in) at his desk. He casts a cursory glance around the room, sees students rushing to complete their assignments before the next class and others discussing their upcoming training seasons - Rikkai students really *did* have a one track mind - and others still chatting, laughing. He sees Kamemiya in one corner, working on something in a notebook.

He turns back to lift his water bottle to his lips, when the classroom door promptly slides open. Yukimura's eyes flit over, and pause once they recognize the figure in the doorway - Shiori Noriko, walking with a lazy sort of air to her gait, that easygoing nature of hers easily discernible even at a distance. She waves at Kamemiya, but then-

-but then, she starts walking towards him.

Yukimura continues to take a sip of his water in a single, fluid movement. He briefly locks eyes with her but doesn't really do anything to acknowledge her presence until she comes to a stop in front of his desk. She stands there for a moment, a small, cheerful smile on her lips and looking down at him in his seat. "Hey," she greets, and even her voice, her tone, is too laid-back for his tastes.

He's not used to that much casual-calm.

Nonetheless, he offers her a pleasant smile of his own and nods his head once in greeting. "Hello." He doesn't really understand why she's here, unless Genichiro's theories of "the soccer team intends to murder you, Seiichi, be careful" is actually true (he really doubts it is, though).

She has an arm distinctly hidden behind her back, though, and Yukimura will admit that for a moment, he feels hesitant and wary.

Noriko reveals her arm and unceremoniously half-drops something onto the center of his desk. It hits the wooden surface with a distinct *clink*, like glass hitting wood. His gaze trails silently down from her smiling face to the object she's placed in front of him.

It's-

... a plant. (*1)

It's a white lotus flower and it's nothing unique or special, but it's the way it's presented that makes Yukimura pause. The bloom is encased in a small, circular glass globe, with a small opening to the side; there's a carpeting of small pebbles on the floor of the dome, and a small, tiny ring at the top where twine is tied around, so that one could hold it up by the string.

It's... surprisingly pretty.

Yukimura looks between the globe and Noriko a few times, the smooth smile on his lips unwavering, and finds that Noriko has an

almost *expectant* smile on her features. And it's not- the smile doesn't seem expectant of a compliment, or a thank you, but it's waiting for something and he has trouble placing a finger on what.

She sees his puzzlement, though, and huffs a short laugh. "It's a present," she clarifies, but that only makes him more confused. "Um. Like an apology present."

A tribute, his mind thinks, *or a sacrificial offering* . Instead, he picks it up carefully in one slender hand, brings it up to eye level so that he can peer inside at the white blossom. "Hoping to appease the team's wrath with this?" he asks, and there's a mild teasing sort of tone to his words.

Noriko laughs again, but she doesn't deny it. "It's worth a try, right?"

Her honesty, at least, is gratifying.

"I heard you liked gardening, so."

What is it, he wonders, *with the 'heard about you' thing* ? Because he's only met her a week ago, but she seems to know the strangest details of his life that he certainly hadn't shared with her before. He raises a brow at her.

Noriko has the grace to look a little chagrined as she shrugs and smiles. "Rikkai Dai," she says, and it's been a while since anyone's so openly acknowledged the unsavory, almost fanatic nature of Rikkai Dai's social politics and rumors. He peers at her with a tilted head, and thinks that this is the second time she's done so. He'd almost thought it was a fluke, the first time.

Yukimura doesn't know what else to say, though, doesn't know if there's anything left to be said. So instead, he sets it down on his desk. "Ah. Well, thank you."

"Do you like it?"

He realizes now what that expectation was. It makes his lips twitch into a smile. "It's very lovely. It was thoughtful of you."

Noriko grins slowly, lazily, taps the glass dome once with her finger. "Oh, but- it's not real. I mean. I just figured. Fake plants are easier to take care of, right?"

Dead things don't require as much care - prettier to look at, preserved carefully and without half the needs as the uglier, alive creatures, he thinks. His smile widens. "I wouldn't have minded a real one. I like gardening. But this is nice, as well. Thank you, Shiorisan."

Noriko seems satisfied, then, and she turns on her heel to leave. She looks at him over her shoulder though, just to laugh a quick "Drop the -san. Formalities like that weird me out."

Yukimura's favorite spot on campus is the rooftop garden **(*2)** the school had constructed his first year at Rikkai Dai. It was the year they'd won four national titles in four different sports, so the alumni had been particularly generous with the donations. As a part of the campus beautification committee, he'd played a large role in its design and construction, and the little iron archway and purple irises he'd specifically chosen are still in the garden.

Thursday the week of his return is the first time he'll have visited it since in nearly a year.

He climbs the steps with a slow, measured gait, pauses to bask in even the moment right before he reaches the top. He's missed it, and when he reaches to grasp the doorknob, he realizes he's also missed the little way the sunlight shimmers through the cracks when the door begins to swing open. He pushes and walks through the doorway, and the breeze is particularly strong up here, today.

People don't visit this garden often, not during lunch, if only because the lengthy flight of stairs up is not worth it in the short lunch period

allotted. But Yukimura rather enjoys the isolation in this garden of his, so it's nice.

He walks slowly through the roof, takes enjoyment in the way the ivy's grown over the brick walls since he's been gone - he likes it, these signs of change and differences since he's last been here, because they're- *proofs of time* . He thinks of how he used to abhor time, the way it dragged on while he lay in white sterile rooms and couldn't lift a finger, thinks of how he'd stare at the ticking clock with such, *such fury* because all he could think of was the way the hand moved while his couldn't.

But he's fine now- better. And he almost *relishes* the passing of time nowadays, in a strange sort of fascination.

"Yukimura?"

He pauses. For a brief moment, he starts to think that perhaps Sanada was right about the whole 'murderous intent' thing.

Because in front of him is Shiori Noriko, and this stopped being cute about two days ago. It's not coincidence anymore, or chance, it's just some sort of sick humor from the universe (that, or the girl was following him). "What a *coincidence* to see you here," he says with a thin smile, voice dry.

She either doesn't notice or doesn't care for his clear lack of amusement at the situation, because she laughs. "What're you doing here?"

"I always come here." He wants to ask the same of her.

He doesn't, though, and it turns out that there's no need because she answers it anyway. "Really? So do I - I've never seen you here before, though."

Well it'd be strange if she had, he thinks, considering he's been in the hospital for quite a while, now. The same thought must occur to

her. "Oh," she says, and his smile widens.

Noriko tosses her empty juice can at the trashcan nearby. Yukimura watches it sail neatly through the air, slot cleanly through the opening and hit the bottom with a metal clang. "Well," she says. "I'll see you around."

Both pause at that. Noriko laughs first. Yukimura's expression loosens into one of amusement. *With your luck, you probably will*, he thinks.

When she breezes by him to get to the door, he thinks he can smell the faint tinge of fresh grass.

Neither stop using the garden after that.

Yukimura had hoped a little that perhaps she wouldn't show up anymore - he rather liked the little moments of peace and quiet he got when he sought this place out, the way he could watch the students down below in silence. And he feels a strange sense of ownership over the space, because it's been his, and his alone for so long, and he hadn't even thought that there'd be another student here.

But Noriko, for whatever her reasons may be, must have liked the gardens just as much as he did - for whenever he came up, usually during lunch, she was there, leaning lazily against the railing, tie loose around her neck and fluttering in the breeze.

He uses the gardens during lunch, and occasionally after school - she does, too.

She doesn't seem to be affected at all by his presence, but then, she doesn't seem like the type to actively seek out moments of isolation, either, so that's no surprise.

For the first few times, she'd simply look over, wave, finish her beverage then leave (even if she didn't mind his presence, she seems to realize that Yukimura actually liked the quiet and solitude, and he kind of appreciates that she respects it).

Then she starts to talk.

"Aren't you scared?" she asks him, once.

Well, more like *stated*, rather than *asked*, because Shiori Noriko had such a blatant and brutally forward manner of speaking that even her questions sounded like statements instead. She didn't know the fine techniques of sugarcoating or subtlety either, because she doesn't seem to understand that there are ways to ask a series of smaller, harmless questions to get the real answer she wants instead of the way she-

It's like a bulldozer, obliterating everything in its path - walls, furniture, everything - to take the shortest route to the answer.

A bulldozer, a U.F.O. - Yukimura finds himself finding the strangest of metaphors when he thinks of her.

And she seems so genuinely curious about it, as though she actually wants to know - not as if she's curious because he's *Yukimura Seiichi*, but as if she really wants to know what it's like, because he's a boy who's sick. Her straightforwardness and lack of- *little hidden questions, because almost everyone almost always has things they want to know just because he's the famous Yukimura and he intrigues them like a display at a freak circus might* -pretenses makes him answer.

"I am," he responds. It would seem like a confession, almost, to say that he wasn't fearless in the face of checkups and hospital walls, but it's only so because no one had ever asked him before. He would have said so to anyone who asked - it wasn't a secret. Noriko was the only one who had asked.

Noriko had leans back against the wall, eyes upturned to the sky. "I mean, you go in there knowing that the next time you come out, they might have told you that your sickness is *back*. "

He laughs. "I do. Thank you for that summary."

Noriko only turns to stare at him. "You're brave, you know?" And her tone isn't heavy, doesn't make this strangely intense conversation feel that way, but there's this sort of conviction in her words that makes him think she believes in the words she's saying.

That they're not empty compliments.

Yukimura only laughs some more. "I don't think so."

Because he was *terrified*. Still, Yukimura thinks. The way Noriko says it makes it seem a little less daunting.

"Woah, what's this weird thing?"

Yukimura looks over to where Kiriara tinkers with the glass globe in his hand from where he'd found it, laying on a table in the clubroom. "Oh," he says, and Kiriara looks over.

"Buchou, is this yours?"

"Ah- yeah."

He'd honestly forgotten about it, had even contemplated just leaving it behind. He thinks of the way she seemed to be genuinely pleased he liked it, though, and stares at the sphere in Kiriara's hand for a moment longer.

"Oh. It's cool. Here you go," Kiriara says as he hands it over, and Yukimura doesn't really have anything else to do besides receive it.

He stares at it a moment longer, contemplates what to do with it, before simply turning back to his sports locker he'd been placing his

tennis shoes into. Inside, he hangs the string on the hook suspended from the ceiling of his locker, and the lotus hangs there, twirling from inside the cubicle.

"Hey, Yukimura," Noriko waves a friendly hello. She lets her duffel bag drop to the floor, drapes herself on one of the benches right after. The sunlight fans out against her skin and warms her up; the breeze plays with her hair.

Yukimura looks up from the chair he's seated on just beside the bench and quirks his lips in a half-smile. "Practice is done?" he asks.

It's been three weeks since he'd first seen her up here. By now, they have a comfortable companionship, and he'd even dare to say that she knows a bit more about him than many people do, if only because of her genuine curiosity and the way she has of making comfortable, idle conversation. (Some people are woefully bad at it, ask questions just to fill the silence only to create more awkwardness - Noriko's surprisingly good at it, and Yukimura thinks that it's because she lacks any sort of pretense at all, because she seems not to care for the social politics that most teenagers busy themselves with).

Noriko shuffles her head in a nod. "Mhm," she hums.

The girls' soccer team practices every day, without fail, for two hours after school (Yukimura has also come to know more about her than he'd initially cared to know, because somewhere in their conversations, she lets slip little things like 'oh man, we have practice again today'). The boys' tennis team usually does, too, but today had been an exception; the courts had been closed for re-painting in the lines.

Sanada, however, is currently in a student council meeting, and they'd agreed to go look at some tennis equipment today, so Yukimura had been waiting for him on the rooftop. "Saya wants me

to wait while she goes to talk to the student council president really quick," Noriko yawns, "So I thought I'd just chill here."

Yukimura thinks of the way Sanada's face would stiffen upon Kamemiya's entrance, and his lips twitch. His eyes flit to the duffel bag on the floor.

'Shiori Noriko; Vice-Captain' is printed in blocked, white letters on the black and yellow bag. "Are you any good?" he asks.

Noriko sits up at that, crosses her legs to settle into the bench. She grins. "Yeah," she answers, and he kind of likes the simplicity of that answer. "I'm the vice-captain, y'know?"

He knew.

Yukimura tilts his head. "Aren't you scared?" he asks, mirroring her words from yesterday, and there's a teasing sort of lilt in his voice when he turns to look at her.

Noriko blinks. "Of what?"

"Losing."

It clearly throws her off because she takes a moment to blink, to stare into Yukimura's unperturbed gaze. She quirks her head to the side and he thinks that she looks kind of like a parakeet when she does. "No," she answers, and the reply is firm, decisive, but the tone is lighthearted and blasé - startlingly so, for such a self-assured answer.

Yukimura curves a brow. "Oh?"

She tilts her head the other way, eyes round and clear as they stare directly back into Yukimura's challenging expression. "Because we don't." A pause. "Lose. We don't lose."

"It's a little presumptuous of you to say that, don't you think?" The ease with which she says it, that *they don't lose*, as though it's some

sort of sure thing - it makes Yukimura want to challenge her a bit, push her down, *break* this breezy attitude of hers.

Noriko only shrugs, then. "Maybe."

Yukimura lets the subject to rest. He peers at her out of the corner of his eyes and thinks she's like a kaleidoscope: looks awfully, almost idiotically simple on the outside, but continually reveals little unexpected twists and fractures when he takes a closer look.

Strange girl.

"So what if you do?"

Noriko looks up at him from her notebook. She'd been attempting to finish up some math homework (after bugging Yukimura into helping her a bit) before the next class on the rooftop. When Yukimura suddenly speaks up, her hand slackens and the pencil clatters to the floor as she raises her head to look at him. "What?"

"Lose."

Noriko's brows furrow into a frown. "... What?"

"What if you lose," he says.

"Because we don't." A pause. "Lose. We don't lose."

It's sudden and out of the blue but when he saw her today her words flitted around his head, like little nuisances that had grown wings to flutter just beyond his reach.

Noriko laughs. "Don't be silly," she says, and he quirks his head at her-

Who would think to call the Child of God *silly* ?

"Losing isn't even an option - what's the point of considering it?"

"Don't you think that's very presumptuous of you to say?" It feels as though they're going in pointless circles, coming back around to the same words.

Noriko laughs. It's not a malicious one, and it's unadulterated and completely free of any implications or meaning - he thinks he's never heard a laugh that's so purely *just a laugh* before. "I mean- maybe. But it doesn't make it any less true - if you're not going to lose, why waste your time worrying about consequences that won't come?"

Her words make him want to ruin her, take her by the arm and show her what such a thing as loss really is, makes him want to *ruin her* just a little. But then, he supposes he's not very qualified to show her what loss is - he's never experienced it, after all. She tilts her head to the side to peer at him with a little smile on her lips, and as she does so, her ponytail comes to swing loosely beside her. "Do you spend your time thinking about what would happen if you lose?"

"No," he murmurs, and it's then that it strikes him odd that they share the same thoughts, even if it's just on one particular subject.

Her smile thins a bit. It's the first time he thinks he sees a glimmer of any sort of deeper emotion attached to her expressions, thinks that perhaps it's a hint of distaste lingering in the curve of her lips. But it's gone when he blinks, and instead, she fixes her ponytail. "Rikkai Dai, *always win*," she says, and it sounds like an echo.

Always.

He tastes the words on his tongue, almost says them back at her. He stops himself at the last moment. Noriko reaches over, pushes a playful punch to his arm (they're tentative friends, now, sort of, just a little bit - it'd be strange if they weren't after weeks of break times spent in one another's company) and laughs.

endnotes. so anything that had a number next to it like (*1) in bold, I've uploaded a picture of it on my tumblr, so go check that out! (for

those who don't know yet, i just started a tumblr where i'll be answering your questions and comments that you may have regarding my stories (you don't need a tumblr to ask me a qs), as well as post little updates regarding my fics. the link is at the top of my bio. my tumblr name is xcoffeelatte)

the party of wolves

A/N: You're going to notice from here on out, BIG BIG BIG changes to the story, hahaha. The overall plotline stays the same and I will retain most of the signature scenes, but I'm taking a bit of a different approach to their relationship this time around! A HUGE thank you to those who reviewed the last chapter, because it really does mean a lot to me, especially because I'm rewriting everything - I really want to know what you guys think!

(More reviews make me a very, very happy person. I also love hearing what you guys think of this new approach, hehe)

Also, lovely lovely cameos from Fyerigurl's characters from TCAFS, haha!

Disclaimer: I do not own PoT.

Noriko isn't a duplicitous person by nature.

What you see is exactly what you get, and rarely does she even entertain thoughts that she wouldn't announce to the whole class. It's easy to mistake her as an airhead, then, someone who's head is *empty*, but she's not dumb, just-

- *uncaring*.

Rikkai Dai is an academy deeply embroiled in the idea of a social hierarchy; everyone has a place and sticks to it, and it's a system meant to keep those at the top, at the top, and to push those at the bottom even lower. Athletes, by default, had a place on the upper half. The better athlete you were - the stronger, faster, *better* you were - the higher you could go.

Yukimura Seiichi is a god on this pyramid, smiling benevolently below at the less fortunate, and Sanada Genichiro is his archangel of

justice, standing solemnly beside him right above the clouds.

People don't really play games (not like Hyotei, where every word, every syllable supposedly means a thousand other things) here, but it's very clear that there's a strong current of competition beneath most pretty smiles. It's especially so among the athletes, who compete even across sports to become the most renowned team, to become the top dogs on a campus that worships those who are athletically privileged.

Noriko, however, does not participate in these little proverbial ramming of the horns. She doesn't really care for the prestige or the idea of proving that she's at the top, doesn't really have the energy to care as much as others do.

Kamemiya Saya, certainly, participates with a vicious sort of excellence. She enters the chess board and takes her place as the queen, utterly destroys the other in this little social politics realm, because she takes a special sort of satisfaction in making it very clear that her team *dominates*. She doesn't engage others herself, but if someone makes the mistake of questioning her, of doubting her, she makes it very, very clear that she's the captain of the national champions girls' soccer team.

Noriko has been lucky to have found a place on the team and therefore, exempt from already a large portion of the politics that everyone finds themselves spinning around. At Rikkai Dai, everyone is expected to take part in this unspoken competition, and it's because teenagers are *brutal*, caught up in a mix of hormones and chemical balances and sheer teenage stupidity and arrogance.

She's just not the type of person to care about things like reputation or prestige or even care about those she doesn't know - she doesn't understand the way some girls seem to be avidly interested in the personal lives of celebrities (and athletes at Rikkai Dai), and she doesn't carry an interest in anything but things that directly affect her.

She's very happy and content in her position at the moment - very deeply assured and aware of who she is and her own identity - that she doesn't feel the pressure of pretense at all (nor does she have much subtlety).

This, Yukimura thinks, is what makes her a comfortable presence to be around. He's very, very different from her - takes every minute action of every person he encounters, spins it and unravels it until he understands every implication.

Noriko has no implications.

And for once, he can settle down and be at ease.

Noriko sees Yukimura playing tennis once more when she's stretching by the field. The courts are placed right beside the soccer fields, and today, he's playing at the farthest court, just beside the gate - she can see him clearly from her position.

She thinks that he's very different from what she'd expected.

She'd expected- a cold, frigid sort of person, who carried with him a visage so severe and lofty that it would be hard to stand beside him simply because he was so *un-human*. After all, what kind of a person did one need to be to get called the *Child of God*?

But she meets him, and he's this lovely, lovely boy with the softest smile and gentlest manners, who's recovering from an illness but still manages to laugh beautifully. She thinks he's unearthly, but in a pretty way.

There *is* something off about him in a way she can't quite put a finger on. He's not outwardly cold, but sometimes, when he smiles or laughs or gazes at something, she thinks she catches a silver of something frozen inside.

It doesn't make much sense, even to her. It's just a fleeting, silly feeling she gets, so she keeps it to herself, thinks quietly to herself that everything he does seems to have a lingering touch of cold that's easily covered up by the lighthearted warmth he projects.

But then, she sees him play tennis.

And everything is different.

If a cold had been flickering inside of him, when Yukimura Seiichi plays tennis, it's as though something's lit his entire being on *hot, hot, burning white hot* fire. He comes to life, then, and gone is the fragile countenance of a boy who's recovering from surgery - in its place is a mighty avenger, burning everything around him in ashes from the sheer vivacity of his spirit.

He's almost unrecognizable in the courts.

He doesn't smile when he plays, but he doesn't need to.

There's an unmistakable elation sparkling in his eyes that even the normally passive Noriko can see.

It makes her pause and stare for seconds, minutes, until Saya finally comes over to push her onto the grass.

"What do you think of when you play?"

Yukimura turns mildly inquisitive eyes upon her. "Hm?"

"Tennis. When you play tennis- what do you think of?"

She wants to know, what it is that makes this boy with glimmers of ice burst into heat, what gives him wings and lights up his entire expression from within .

A laugh. "Nothing."

"Oh."

"What do you think of you when you play soccer?"

"... Nothing."

After all, tennis, soccer- they're remarkably similar in just one very, very small aspect.

One doesn't *think* when they're on the courts, when it's pure instinct and an almost animalistic drive that takes over - things like strategies and plays aren't in the forefront, they're *wired into their bodies*, until it's just one drive against another.

Yukimura lingers in the back of the clubroom for a moment, pausing to remember if he'd picked up his textbook from his locker or not. It's been a few moments since it'd emptied of members so he stands in the quiet solitude of the room, half-turned towards his storage space - had he already taken his book out or left it upstairs?

It's then he hears two voices, familiar but he can't pin exactly who it is; it's one of the many members of the tennis club, he thinks.

"Did you see Yukimura-buchou today?"

"Playing Fukuwa?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah- *brutal*, is what it was."

"I didn't... I didn't think it was true, you know? That technique people talked about."

"I- I didn't really know what to think. I thought he was just really good at tennis. I didn't think he..."

"Fukuwa was *screaming*, do you remember?"

"Yeah."

"Buchou didn't stop."

"... yeah."

"I guess it's true, then."

"What's true?"

"When some of the senpai said that Yukimura-buchou is a *monster* ."

"They say that?"

"Yeah. They said- that when he plays tennis, you can see what he really is: a cold, brutal monster that has a hole where his heart should be."

"Shit."

He wants to brush it off as something silly.

He was Yukimura Seiichi, the leader of the three demon generals - it was Rikkai Dai, *always win*, didn't they know? This is what it took to be called a *god* on the tennis courts, what it took to take the national championships two years in a row, to prepare to take it for a third.

If he did so by robbing his opponents of their senses, it was his prerogative to do so.

They were silly and naïve if they thought that domination came by being nice, being playing politely - in war, one did not cordially *ask* for the keys to the kingdom. They laid siege to the entire land, took what they wanted, burned everything they could not carry, until it was an overwhelming, absolute victory - a *complete surrender*.

This was how they won.

This is how *he* won.

But the words *cold* and *heartless* ring in his head for a little while after that.

He doesn't show any mercy the next day at practice - in this match, he takes away his opponent's sense of sight, smell, and hearing, all within the first ten minutes. He heard the word *heartless* being said in his head, but he can't bring himself to lessen the force with which he smashes the ball; in fact, he drives it harder, watches as it embeds itself in the metal wiring of the fence behind the boy on the other side of the courts.

"Game, Yukimura. 6 - 0."

His jacket flutters smoothly from his shoulders as he turns to gaze at the large crowd of watching, awe-struck members. *This*, he thinks, *is Rikkai Dai's kingdom*.

The loss against Seigaku at Regionals was a fluke.

Even if it wasn't, it won't happen again.

The king has returned to his throne, to find that the scepter's gone missing - and he will burn everything down, take back his scepter, and much, much more.

The next week is the annual Athletics Department Banquet. Technically, it was a party and dinner thrown by the school to celebrate their star athletes and to promote goodwill and good sportsmanship among the teams; in reality, it was where the regulars of each team came for some delicious food and even sweeter dessert: power plays.

Saya, in particular, looked forward to this event every year. It was a special sort of pride to walk her team into the banquet hall, look around, and know that she's one of the four national champion teams to grace the area. She does a splendid job at asserting her position at the top and reminding "bottom-feeder" teams to work harder; it's practically a tradition of hers.

Nothing has changed this year.

If anything, she glows *brighter* due to her captaincy, and when the girls team walks into the hall, it's a bit late and the banquet is already in full swing. Most athletes are seated with their respective teams, but there are a few here and there, scragglers or social butterflies.

Saya struts in with all the glee of a predatory lion walking into a den of sheep.

As the full team crosses the threshold, there's a brief, glorious moment when all of the female athletes - and quite a few of the males - take notice. There's a recognition in their eyes, an acknowledgement, and Saya's smug grin doesn't go unnoticed by Noriko, who's standing right beside her.

"Where should we sit?" one of the girls asks, and Saya looks around the room.

But then, was there even a question of where to sit, when there's an empty table beside the girls tennis team? Saya locks eyes with Hayashi Yuzuru from across the room, and Noriko can swear she sees predatory fangs emerge from both their grins.

Saya practically struts as she brings over her team to clutter the table. "Hey, Saya," Yuzuru waves. "Your team's looking pretty good this year," she nods at the group of well-toned, slender girls, and Saya beams.

"Well, you know. Nationals is starting soon. Yours look good too."

The pride in Yuzuru's eyes is practically blinding. "Nationals," she says. "And this year I'm vice captain - and you're the captain."

"I know." And then the two are grinning at one another, smiles hooked on their ears, and from somewhere behind them, someone makes a gagging noise.

When Saya looks up, it's Misaki Kanako, captain of the girls' swim team. "The way you two stroke each other's egos and the way you get off on it is like some kind of sick foreplay."

Yuzuru's eyes narrow slightly, *dangerously*, in annoyance, but it's Saya's voice that can cut steel when it murmurs "Oh, sorry. We forgot that there are some teams around who don't know the pleasure of winning gold at nationals, yet."

"Hope you can make it past regionals, sweetheart," Yuzuru adds, sickeningly sweet and with a pleasant smile. "You have our support."

"Maybe if you manage to taste the gold, we'll let you join. You know, for a threesome."

It's a well known fact that Kanako's team hasn't even made it near nationals in the past three years. She flushes a bright, angry red, gives them a contemptuous stare before whirling away; Yuzuru rolls her eyes and Saya watches her walk away, smug.

Yukimura notices the entire exchange through amused eyes. He and Sanada had been on their way over to the girls' table to offer their congratulations and greetings to Yuzuru and Hanae - they've always been quite cordial, after all, despite Hanae's apparent and severe distaste towards him. (Secretly, Sanada is rather sure that he takes a special sort of delight in being unendingly kind to Fukuda Hanae, who flinches as though he's just stabbed her in the arm whenever he gives her a polite gesture).

Noriko doesn't bat an eye and instead, her interest lies in the buffet table being arranged not far away. Fukuda Hanae, the captain of the girls' tennis team, is distinctly uninterested in the brief scuffle; she only spares it a cool glance before looking away, and Yukimura tilts his head and thinks- *Lions, after all, don't concern themselves with the matters of sheep*. There's a difference in the lack of attention between Noriko and Hanae, however, because with Hanae it's the indifference of a predator to the squabbles between its prey.

With Noriko, the sheer lack of attention in her eyes can be nothing but a stark apathy towards anything remotely related to such little scuffles, the little 'who has bigger fangs' competition that Yukimura had always found a bit tiring, himself.

He takes a smooth step forward and makes his presence known.

Fukuda visibly stiffens. His smile widens just a little bit.

From behind him, Sanada opens his mouth to say a quiet hello, when he catches Kamemiya Saya and Hayashi Yuzuru's simultaneous eyes; his lips snap close in under a second. The girls turn to one another to smile a small smile, riddled with *implications*, before turning back to Sanada, who Yukimura is sure gives a tiny, imperceptible jolt.

"Hello, Fukuda-san, Kamemiya-san," he murmurs. He addresses the other two next- "Hayashi-san, Shiori."

There's a distinct order in which he addresses them - captains first, tennis first. He does not buy into the hierarchy at Rikkai Dai, but there's most definitely a chain of command to be seen, here, that he's noticed from the moment they walked into the building.

Fukuda Hanae has a silent sort of leadership where she doesn't speak, but she hardly needs to; a glance and a twitch of a muscle in her neck, and her girls are in position to pierce through the opponent with the weapon of her choosing. She has very, very few words and

even fewer expressions, but she manages to get her message across very, very clear.

Kamemiya Saya, on the other hand, has a vastly different type of personality - she is most definitely loud, and often, the loudest person in the room. She growls and yells and stomps her foot and swings her bobbed hair; her expressions are clear and intense. But this is not what gives her her leadership - this is simply her personality; she quells her girls with her sheer ability and fierceness of spirit, and the yelling is just a side effect of her vigor.

They are both deceptively strong captains.

Hayashi Yuzuru may seem lighthearted with her growling (that's on par with Kamemiya's) and her almost comical rivalry with Sanada, his own vice captain, but it takes only a sharp look for her to send the other members scrambling to get in line.

It is Shiori Noriko's leadership qualities that he can't quite ascertain.

No matter how he looks at it, there's hardly a shred of dominance in her at all - at a table full of *alphas*, she gives off a clear impression of a *beta*, for her laid-back persona and lazy nature that makes her the last to take a seat, the one to receive the leftovers instead of claiming what she wants, can only suggest so. But then, she doesn't defer to anyone, either, only laughs when Kamemiya clearly tries to get her in line, and doesn't pull rank on anyone else either, doesn't bare her fangs to make anyone cow their heads.

In fact, it's almost as though she's exempt entirely from the power dynamics at play.

He's jarred out of his thoughts when Fukuda twitches a nod his way, distaste barely concealed on her features. Hayashi smiles a friendly enough hello and Kamemiya waves a haphazard, borderline dismissive wave. Her attention is instead focused on Sanada with a razor-sharp focus, and Yukimura can feel his discomfort even from here (it makes his lips flicker into a small smile).

Noriko's the last to respond. She looks up at him from where she's draped over her chair and lifts her hand in an airy salute, grins, says "Yo, Yukimura."

"Sanada," Saya says, and Yukimura can see the proverbial fangs closing around Sanada's neck. "Who's going to the drawings tomorrow?"

Ah, right. All sports teams in the area were to report to Kokusai Gakuen tomorrow morning to receive their brackets for the upcoming preliminaries. *Nationals*, he thinks, and for a split second, it's clear that the same thought is in all of their minds.

From the outside, there are some that stare for a moment too long at this particular group - three of the four national champion teams' captains and vice captains, all gathered at a single table. In a room full of predators, the *monsters* have come out to play, and they make a bit of an intense picture in the center of the hall.

It's Noriko who dispels the moment with a laugh. "Saya, lighten up. Let's get some food instead."

Saya swats away her hand, and it's clear that Yuzuru is just as focused on Sanada. Fukuda has already turned to discuss in low murmurs, strategies she'd been going over, with her doubles two slots. So instead, Noriko turns to Yukimura.

"Wanna grab some food? It looks really good," she says, and Yukimura can't help but to laugh, because yes, he knows - he's seen the way she'd been singlemindedly eyeing the buffet table since entering the hall.

Nobody really focused on the food at this event, not ever, not when it was actually just a place for the athletes to gather and challenge one another to little mind games and contests of 'who's the bigger, badder wolf.' Well. Nobody, except for Shiori Noriko, who was craning her neck to check the far end of the table.

"Alright," he murmurs.

Sanada almost chokes, bites back a silent plea not to leave him with the twin grins of Kamemiya and Hayashi, but this only spurs Yukimura to start walking towards the buffet with Noriko even faster.

"So," Yukimura murmurs. "What do you think?"

Noriko glances up at him from where she'd been scrutinizing a muffin in her hand, evidently checking it for traces of poppy seeds (something she wholly dislikes). "Hm?" she says and she's clearly still concentrated on the food in her hand, rather than his question.

It sparks a flare of amusement in him. "About Rikkai Dai."

And it's such a heavily loaded question, because Rikkai Dai is a large school with a lot of- *unique culture*. This predatory, shark-eat-shark sort of athletes' circle, for one, the vicious competition even across sports and fields. The students' gossip mill, the teachers' favoritism for athletes, the way everything in this school is run by the motto *Rikkai Dai, always win - whatever it takes*.

"It's like any other school, isn't it?" Noriko says, and the tone is completely genuine when she first speaks the words. Before Yukimura can quirk a brow at her she seems to have realized her own sentence and promptly laughs. "I mean. Well."

Yukimura's own lips curve into a smile. "Well."

He's already been in this environment for three years. He's not a perpetuator of the dynamics, here, but then, he's always been a force of nature himself - he's exempt from the games for an entirely different reason. When he runs his team, however, he, too, plays the game.

He leads them, defeats their enemies at the front line, makes an example out of failures for others to never, ever do the same. He

doesn't pull rank but only because he doesn't have to, because a *smile* from his lips and his team knows enough to get themselves in order; he's the undeniable, irrefutable alpha in their midst.

Shiori's lack of rank is what surprises him, just a bit, for her position as vice-captain of the team. He's curious as to what Rikkai Dai seems like to an outsider - to a transfer.

Noriko shrugs. "It's a little intense, but I mean," she licks a swipe of cream from her thumb, "Nothing too bad."

He wants to know what it is, her seeming imperviousness to the stifling aura of this school.

"I just don't get involved."

But see, he wants to say. You don't get to choose .

Noriko laughs that easy, self-deprecating laugh of hers, pops a miniature cookie in her mouth. "Saya deals with that so I don't have to."

"Mm."

Noriko looks up at him, then, puts down a brownie that had already been lifted halfway towards her open mouth. "I mean, it's a little much. Athletes or whatever, we're still junior high students." She nudges him with her shoulder and huffs another laugh (she laughs quite a lot, he notices, but it's easygoing and almost infectious in its lightheartedness). "We should live a little."

We should live a little.

A pause. He smiles at that one, genuine and he means it, this smile that he gives her. "I suppose we are. We should."

READ. REVIEW. LOVE?

the party of wolves part ii

A/N: Hey guys, I know this update is a little late, but I'm gonna write a little faster to hopefully catch up! Also: if I ever take a long update, you can usually expect me to post a preview or two on my tumblr, like I did with this chapter! So if you haven't already, check that out (the link is at the top of my bio).

Also. Another lovely shout out to everyone who reviewed, and especially 'princess-li-lei-an,' who came all the way onto tumblr to show her love! I really appreciate all your support and I hope you're enjoying this fic (if you do let me know in a review, keke.)

Disclaimer: I do not own PoT.

When Noriko finishes loading her tray with an alarming amount of food at last, Yukimura takes a moment to glance back at his team. Sanada, predictably, is still caught in the claw-hold of Hanae and Kamemiya. Marui is rapidly devouring every sugary concoction in sight, and Jackal is beside him, looking at his teammate eating with a faint green tinge to his skin. Yanagi shares a quiet conversation with Yagyu; Niou is off flirting with some members of the girls' volleyball team (he always did say that he thought the volleyball girls had the nicest bodies). Kirihara is-

-constantly texting on his phone, and Yukimura has a small idea of who it is that he seems to be messaging all the time these days. It makes his lips curve into a small, amused smile.

"C'mon," Noriko says, nudging at his arm. "Let's go sit."

They go back to the table and Sanada seems visibly relieved that Yukimura has returned - but to his dismay, Yukimura sits across the circular table with Noriko, smiles cheerily at Sanada and the two girls beside him.

"You're a transfer, I heard," he says, and there's a clear question in there.

Noriko glances at him from where she's taking a sip of her soda. "Oh," she puts down her drink, licks at the corner of her mouth. "Yeah. This year, actually."

"That's a little late, isn't it?" Certainly, transferring in the last year of junior high seemed a bit odd. Noriko agrees with a laugh.

"My parents just moved this past summer and our new house is closer to Rikkai Dai than my last school. I've been playing with Saya for years, though."

Shiori Noriko meets Kamemiya Saya when they're both five years old and entering a junior soccer club for the first time. Noriko is wide-eyed and completely oblivious to the rules of soccer and Saya is well-versed and practically lunging for the field the minute she sees it. They're not fast friends, not really - Noriko can't be bothered with all of Saya's intensity (even at five years old) and Noriko's devil-may-care attitude puts Saya on edge.

Both girls make it into the top five ranks at their club by the time they're eight. They get put into smaller practice groups together, because they're both pretty decent and good players practice with one another, in this club. Then one day, Saya forgets her cleats at home on the day there's a level test; Noriko lends her hers when it comes to Saya's turn. The next day, Saya pulls an airheaded Noriko off to the side to avoid being hit by a stray ball.

By the time they're nine, they're inseparable.

*When they're ten, they move to the same youth academy club (*1) . Saya already knows she wants to do this, this sport and this rush of adrenaline when she's on the field, for the rest of her life. She's serious about it, and she's got a shot, if evidenced by her acceptance into this elite club. Noriko catches up to the same dream*

a year later and at age eleven, both girls know that soccer is in their veins.

Then comes twelve, and Saya is already dead-set on Rikkai Dai, the team that has one of the finest sports tracks from across the nation. She applies, and expects and plans for Noriko to join her. But then, Noriko's parents relocate to another area for her father's job, and Saya is devastated.

Noriko, for all of her typical ambivalence, is deeply disappointed as well. At some point, Saya pleads her parents if maybe Noriko can stay at their house, live with them and attend Rikkai together, but that'd been a ridiculous idea overall.

So for the next two years the girls are separated, because Noriko's new house is so far she can't even participate in the after school youth academy they'd been enrolled in, either. They're still best friends, of course, text almost every day and video chat at least once a week, but it's not the same - Saya's missing a striker and Noriko's missing a captain.

Then Noriko's family moves back to Kanagawa, and things start to begin. Saya's given the captain position at the end of her second year and she doesn't take a vice-captain, not yet, and once Noriko transfers into Rikkai Dai, the team starts to realize that Kamemiya Saya has been reserving the position for Shiori Noriko.

They're outraged, at first, and it's unacceptable that this stranger can just waltz in and claim a regular seat - this is the lion's den, see, and one doesn't simply just walk into the center. But Saya is nothing if not fair, and she puts Noriko in the regular selection matches herself.

The protests subside when Noriko steps onto the field.

She takes the vice captaincy two weeks after the school term starts. Saya is smug.

"Mm," Yukimura says, and it's a polite sort of tone, the kind that implies that he's already lost interest but is being courteous. Yukimura Seiichi, after all, is always courteous. Noriko doesn't seem to mind though.

From a distance, he sees the boys' swim team - the fourth and final team that currently holds the 'national champion' title at Rikkai Dai - enter the banquet hall, and there's another small ripple of murmurs at their entrance. Noriko seems distinctly uninterested in favor of picking apart the pastry in her hands. Yukimura, however, finds a larger amusement in watching the little scuffles throughout the hall.

For such physique-based athletes, it's a little funny, he thinks, that all the fights take place with well-aimed barbs and level glances, instead of out on the playing field.

"Hey, Maeda," he hears a feminine voice call from just beside him.

When he glances to the side, he finds that it's one of the soccer girls; he can't really remember their names, but everyone's wearing a little name tag tonight. Her's says 'Fujisaki Akemi,' with a sleek ponytail that falls to her shoulders and half-lidded eyes and high cheekbones. She's waving over at- Maeda Akira, he recognizes from his own class: regular on girls' softball, if he's correct (and he is).

Made it to top sixteen in Nationals. Choked, there, disappointing most people who'd anticipated them to join the ring of national champions, came back without a medal nor a congratulations.

Maeda doesn't look like she wants to, but walks over anyways with an uncomfortable expression on her face. "Yeah?" she mutters.

Fujisaki smiles serenely at her, and despite the lidded look, her eyes have a razor-sharp edge. "Hey," she greets, and her voice is too-nice to be genuine. "We just wanted to talk."

"Since, you know, we keep hearing that you're talking to *everyone* about us - except to us." It's the girl sitting next to Fujisaki, and this

one is Matsuoka Mayumi, also in his and Fujisaki's class. She's not as willow-slender as Fujisaki is, is a little stockier with darker makeup and tanner skin, short pixie hair that's artfully messy. And when she smiles, it's much less subtle than Fujisaki's calm visage - this one is outright aggressive, fangs and all.

"... I don't know what you're talking about," Maeda sniffs. Her body language is easy to read, because Yukimura can see the discomfort in the way she wraps her arms loosely about her stomach, shoulders curled in and raised upwards.

Easy prey, he thinks. Hasn't she learned by now that wolves can smell fear the way they smell blood?

"Oh, you know. How we keep taking up the boys' field space without following the rules, how we keep ' *bitching*' for new equipment, how we're obnoxious and rude and- what's that last word she used, Mayumi?" Fujisaki turns to her friend, voice dripping feigned curiosity; she knows exactly what the last word is, but she offers the final bite to Matsuoka.

Matsuoka jumps in with ill-concealed glee. " *Arrogant*," she finishes. "She called us arrogant." She reaches forward, dusts off an imaginary piece of lint from Maeda's shoulder and this action alone has the girl flinching, just a little bit. "I can't really say anything about the field, though. But then, I guess if you guys knew a thing or two about practicing, you wouldn't have... *choked* at Nationals."

Matsuoka looks up with a grin. From beside her, Fujioka makes a delicate choking motion with her hands upon her neck, a little accompanying sound of strangulation mimicked from her throat.

"Oops," Matsuoka laughs. "You can go now." She makes a little shooing motion with her hands.

And Maeda looks *livid* and mortified - for a second, Yukimura even thinks she's going to lash out and retaliate. He wants to see it, wants to see one of the lower-ranking sheep try to rise up against the lions

prowling at the top, because there's this morbid part of him that wants to see the ensuing bloodbath.

But it seems that for all of her rage, even she knows better than to say anything to the national champion girls' soccer team, especially when she's at *their* table. Maeda doesn't say anything. Instead, she tightens her jaw and stalks away, and a few of the girls at the table titter quietly, though with no effort to conceal it. He even sees Akaya look up from his phone to smirk a little (he always did think lower-ranking athletes were 'lame') and Niou pause in his flirting to snicker, too (Niou thought any kind of conflict between girls was hilarious).

Noriko doesn't look disturbed in the slightest.

"Your teammates are rather vicious," Yukimura murmurs quietly enough that the other girls don't hear, though he wouldn't particularly mind if they did.

Noriko looks up at him and glances at Fujisaki and Matsuoka, and when she looks back, there's a sheepish smile on her lips. She shrugs, a little helplessly, as if to say 'What can you do?' "Apparently Maeda was talking about us around the banquet hall," she admits.

Which was the girl's mistake, really - one didn't go around trash-talking a higher ranking team without expecting any sort of consequence, even if the girls *had* been a bit brutal. But then, a team tended to take on the characteristics of its captain, and Kamemiya Saya was not to be tampered with.

"Did you think it warranted that?" he asks. He's not really accusing them of being too-harsh, but he's genuinely curious (just a bit) as to what Noriko thinks when she sees her teammates licking clean the carcasses of others.

Noriko pauses. "No," she says. "But I don't really think any of this stuff is necessary, y'know? We're all athletes, and we're all Rikkai Dai students - Saya says I just 'don't get it,' which, I guess, I don't."

She laughs and throws her head back a little. "But I mean- as for their intensity- have you seen Saya?"

He has. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if Kamemiya handed out dog bones to the girl who could rip the most flesh off of their opponent.

"Oh, but. Saya's also really strict on the whole 'abusing privileges' thing. Like, the team has this super strict policy on following the rules and misdemeanors and stuff - it's stricter than the school's. So we don't like, bully anyone or make trouble."

They both knew a handful - or a bit more than a handful, actually - of athletes who purposely went out of their way to make trouble with the non-athlete students, just because they knew that they had administration on their side. The little first year was just one incident of many.

After all, how many teenagers *wouldn't* abuse blatant favoritism from the school's authority?

"I don't know. As long as our team isn't starting things first, I think Saya lets most of the stuff go."

Saya didn't tolerate troublemakers. She didn't forgive members who used their championship title to actively bully others, because she said it was tainting and twisting their sport into something else entirely; she didn't, however, mind retaliating when she saw something out of order. When provoked, Saya didn't hold back with her own set of fangs, didn't mind brandishing her claws to assure the others that she was, indeed, an alpha.

Likewise, if her team was pawed at first, she wholeheartedly encouraged responding in turn - "Give as good as you get," was one of her sayings on the field. She had a lot of sayings.

"And you?"

"What?"

Yukimura smiles a small, amused sort of smile at her, tilts his head as though he's trying to unravel her head. "Do you let this stuff go?" She keeps saying 'Saya says this,' 'Saya lets them do this,' as though she isn't also an authority figure, and it throws Yukimura off a little bit. Genichiro, after all, takes a heavy hand in the leadership despite deferring to Yukimura.

"Oh. Well," she laughs. "Iunno. It's not something I really concern myself with. I just play, y'know."

Just play, she says, as though that kind of thing is easy to do in a school where a sport isn't just a sport, but also the connotations that comes with the jersey and the medals.

"Mm," he says, even if he doesn't quite understand her at all.

When the banquet wraps up and it's time to go home, Yukimura tries to find Sanada. It takes him a while, but he finally locates his vice captain currently engaged in a glowering match with Kamemiya Saya, and he thinks he can trace the bulging outline of a vein standing out from Sanada's neck and forehead.

"Tennis is not stupid-"

"Yes it is," Saya hisses, and the gleam in Sanada's eyes is positively murderous.

"You don't have the discipline to last even a minute in a tennis match-"

"What would you know about discipline, running around like crazy cavemen with sticks in your hands-"

" *Rackets*," Sanada bellows, and his vein bulges just a bit more. "They're rackets, not sticks, you uneducated-"

"Like I give a shit what they're called, it's stupid, is what I'm saying-"

Yukimura's smile widens just a tad. He doesn't care much if tennis is insulted by a girl who doesn't know much beyond soccer, is unruffled in the face of such criticism; Genichiro, on the other hand, looks as though he's seriously contemplating homicide, and it makes him just a little bit excited with anticipation. He hasn't seen too much bloodshed tonight, seeing as how most of the athletes were keeping it tame.

This, though, looks rather fun.

Fortunately - or unfortunately, in his case - the placating tone of Shiori Noriko pipes up from behind him with a "Maa maa, Saya, that's kinda rude, don'tcha think? Tennis is pretty cool, I think." Noriko gives Yukimura a non-discreet thumbs up as she flits past him to drape an easy arm on her captain's shoulders.

She pulls the girl a step back - wise choice, considering how Sanada looks livid and lethal. "Sorry, Sanada. Saya just gets a little drunk on all the power after these things."

Saya looks properly affronted and turns to Noriko with an incredulous expression. "I do *not*," she huffs with indignation, and Noriko only laughs.

"C'mon, queen bee, it's time to head home. We'll catch you later, Sanada, Yukimura."

Sanada has to bite back the *Please don't* that threatens to spill from his lips.

Yukimura glances at him and conceals a laugh behind a pale hand.

LINEBREAK

After the banquet, Yukimura doesn't ease up during practice.

He activates the *yips* earlier and earlier during matches, completely obliterates all of his opponents without mercy; he could do so without using the technique on them, but he uses it anyway. None of the regulars question it, not even Sanada, who firmly believes in using only the energy and power necessary to complete a task.

Because this, this is Yukimura's way of returning to his throne after such a long absence. This is the way in which he cements his monarchy, the way he leaves no trail of doubt behind as to who the true leader of the demon generals is. He will take away *everything*, every last vestige of comfort and control that the opponent has - regardless if it is one of his own - and without fail, leave behind not even the ability to cry.

This, he thinks as he takes away a second year's hearing, is what happens to your opponents when they face us. Know this. Keep this knowledge tucked away in the back of your mind and allow it to sit there, this knowledge that this is Rikkai's strength.

This display of power is unnecessary to win, but it is necessary to rule.

His latest opponent is on his knees on the opposing side of the courts, screaming, *shrieking* with terror, trembling hands scratching at his eyes.

Not once does Yukimura's jersey fall from his shoulders.

Sanada speaks to him about it only once. "You're not easing up," he comments, and it's laden with implications. *You've shown them your strength - isn't it time to lighten up a little?*

Yukimura gives him a pleasant smile. "Rikkai Dai doesn't tolerate any losses, whether it's during practice or the tournament." His smile widens. "Just making sure I don't lose, Genichiro."

Sanada never says another word about the subject again.

Noriko begins to gradually develop an interest in tennis.

At first, it had been sheer fascination at the number of fans the boys had. And then, it was an intrigue at the way they dominated in the tennis courts, the strange techniques they had and the cool little tricks ("Saya, he made the ball roll across the net- No, I'm not dreaming this up, I'm telling you- Why won't you believe me, Sayaaaa-"). And then, it was- just the game.

She'd never had much of an interest in other sports - kind of got into American football for a little while before she dropped it. She watched soccer with avid enthusiasm, though, and watching tennis, she thinks she can start liking this sport, too.

She tells Yukimura as much, and her eyes widen a little when she sees the way he visibly *brightens* at the mention of soccer.

"Yes," he murmurs. "It's very nice."

"It's different from soccer," Noriko says.

Yukimura laughs first this time. "Very. I don't really think there's any comparison to be made between the two."

"Yeah, but it's- I dunno. You guys make tennis look cool."

And at that, Yukimura seems genuinely pleased, for his smile is a little softer around the edges this time around. "Thank you," he says, and he thinks that this sort of compliment about tennis, he doesn't mind so much.

Noriko leans back on her elbows, fully laid out on the rooftop bench. "When do your games start?"

"They already have."

She blinks, surprised. "Really? Already?"

The soccer and tennis tournaments started at around roughly the same times - they did, after all, draw their opponents on the same day. But whereas the soccer tournament could take up to four to five months depending on if a team made it to the finals round (which they always did), the tennis tournament took up a grand total of a single month. Soccer games took week long breaks in between games, at minimum; tennis games were rapid-fire matches day after day. (*2)

"The tennis tournament shuffles through a bit quicker than the soccer matches do, to my understanding. Though we did receive the BYE for the first round of matches, the second round is coming up soon."

Noriko makes a sound of understanding in her throat. She throws her head back and bares her neck to the sunlight beaming down from above, closes her eyes to avoid being blinded by the light. "I guess you'll get the gold earlier than us," she murmurs.

And it's in moments like this that Yukimura realizes that she may not participate in the little power plays at Rikkai, but she is a *thoroughbred Rikkai Dai athlete*. Little offhand comments like 'you'll get the gold earlier than us,' the assumptions that they both would so easily attain the championship trophy, the way she doesn't even consider loss a possibility.

But he is just the same. Because he smiles in turn, lets the sunlight fan against his skin, and says "Mm. I hope Kamemiya won't antagonize Sanada too much over it."

Noriko laughs.

The next day as practice approaches its end, Saya approaches Noriko, a megaphone tucked underneath her arm. Noriko is on her way to the showers, perspiration clear on her forehead and breathing labored. She stops, though, when she sees Saya, grins as she wipes the sweat off of her forehead with her forearm. "Hey, captain," she

says, and there's the teasing lilt in her voice from whenever she calls Saya 'captain.'

Saya rolls her eyes but it's fond. "Hey. I was thinking we could stop by the little stationary shop on the way home? I need some new notebooks."

Noriko pauses. "Oh." Saya frowns. "Oh man, I can't - I have plans. Can we go tomorrow?"

Saya blinks at her. "What plans?"

"With Yukimura."

If anything, the bewildered expression on Saya's features intensifies. "... *What?* " is all she manages to splutter. Because- since when had Yukimura and Noriko gotten so close as to have *plans* together after school? Saya's known that they talk frequently, sure, if only because the roof was both of their favorite places, but she hadn't thought-

Then again, she pauses, if Noriko really had been spending all that off time with Yukimura, it isn't that much of a surprise.

Still. She just hadn't expected it.

Noriko looks entirely unperturbed and shrugs with a casual air, and sometimes, Saya wants to strangle that easygoing manner of hers right out of her. "I was talking about that new cafe down the block and he mentioned he wanted to try out their menu, so. We're going."

Saya's eyes get wider. "... You and Yukimura Seiichi are *going to a cafe*. "

Noriko laughs and slings a sweaty arm around Saya. Saya squawks a little but at this point, they've pushed each other around after practice so much that bodily fluids don't really bother them anymore. "Saya, we're junior high students. We should act like it sometimes."

Saya huffs. "I know that. I'm just- *whatever*. "

Noriko laughs and smacks a teasing kiss to the side of Saya's cheek, making her groan and wipe at the skin where Noriko had pressed her lips into. "I'll go with you tomorrow after school, 'kay?" Noriko knocks her hip into Saya's before jogging over to the clubroom showers, and Saya only rolls her eyes with a sigh.

At the cafe, Noriko sets herself down with an impossibly tall glass of strawberry parfait and Yukimura gets a cup of green tea. They sit at a booth towards the back, and she's talking about a recent movie she went to see that Yukimura thinks he'd find interesting.

He still hasn't figured her out completely, but it's easy to talk to her.

Because she *gets it*, she's a high-ranking athlete too, because she understands all the subtle nuances of what it means to play a sport at Rikkai Dai. But she doesn't come with the mind games and the power plays that he so often tires of, and it's nice, having someone else outside the team to talk to. He has other friends, of course, acquaintances, certainly, but in terms of athletic standing, Shiori Noriko comes the closest.

Noriko likes spending time with Yukimura just because. Friends don't need a reason to like each other, right? He's comfortable and pleasant, even if he has this permanent distance between himself and others, and she likes his company.

Because she's heard of his whole 'Child of God' persona, has heard he's a demon on the courts, but she's also seen him stop to help a first year boy out of the goodness of his heart. He's *nice*, is the thing, is a genuinely kind person, and she likes that.

"Don't girls typically watch what they eat?" he asks, and he's half-kidding with a smile on his lips, but he's half serious, too.

Noriko laughs. "Man, we do like three hours of hardcore conditioning a day. If I gain weight from a parfait, I'm giving up on life."

Yukimura chuckles a little at that one. "And when do your games start?"

"This week. But we got a BYE, so we actually start playing next week. But then, Saya's thinking of using our reserves for the first few games, so I actually don't know."

Yukimura quirks a brow. But then, he oughtn't be so surprised, he supposes. The tennis team probably would have sent in their reserves for a bit, too, if it hadn't been for that- *fluke* at Nationals. It was a fluke, he tells himself, but he won't take any chances, either.

"I kind of want to play, though," Noriko admits. "But Saya wants to keep us on some intense conditioning sessions for a little while more, which means no games, so I guess the reserves are going in."

"It ought to be fine," he murmurs and takes a quiet sip of his tea. "Sanada always says to never use more force than necessary, after all."

Noriko leans in, lowers her voice a little as if it's a secret: "To be honest- Sanada scares the *shit* out of me."

And that's where Yukimura starts to laugh, a little brighter than his quiet chuckles, shoulders visibly shaking, just a bit.

endnotes.

(*1) Okay. So. I know that particularly in European countries, there are things called 'youth academies' - basically, junior soccer clubs (outside of school teams, of course), that train young talented athletes into hopefully nurturing them into pros and a lot of elite clubs have links to renowned / certain teams. I honestly don't know much about sports, and I had to research this, and I couldn't really find much on the Japanese system. For now, this is what I'm using, but if anyone thinks / knows it's wrong / any other info, please don't hesitate to let me know!

(*2) Again. What is with the timeline in prince of tennis? I've been trying to figure out the length of the tournaments and someone told me that basically the entirety of the Nationals tournament takes only a month, because matches are basically every day. So that's the info I'm using here - so essentially, soccer and tennis start off at roughly the same time, but soccer lasts longer. Again, if anyone knows anything, please let me know, and sorry if it's wrong!

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